



style staple: BENCHTOPS

Whether you love the luxe look of marble or the industrial feel of stainless steel, the right benchtop will instantly raise your kitchen's status in the style stakes

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Whatever style of kitchen you choose, the benchtop is certainly one of the most important items to get right. It needs to be hardworking, tough, stain resistant and good looking – plus, a great worktop can make a budget kitchen look a million dollars. You can choose from a vast range of materials in all sorts of colours and styles, or even mix and match: “One of the key trends right now is the asymmetrical layered look, with benchtops made up of different surface finishes and varying thicknesses,” explains Lorraine Brigdale of Laminex. Read on for the lowdown on just which surface works best where.

ACRYLIC

Pros: If you love the seamless look of a benchtop with an integrated sink and splashback, then look no further than acrylic. This malleable material can be moulded to fit even the most awkwardly shaped kitchen with no visible joins. It's non-porous, heat-resistant and anti-bacterial, and comes in everything from icy whites to explosive brights. Chips and scratches can be repaired quickly and easily too.

Cons: The top-end acrylics can cost a pretty penny, and some claim the material can develop a dull, flat finish. However, newly released ranges such as Laminex's 'Freestyle' collection boast some subtle idiosyncrasies and a touch of twinkle that add depth and texture.

Expect to pay: From \$400 to \$990/sqm, fully installed.

Contact: Laminex, 132 136, laminex.com.au; Corian, 1800 267 426, corian.com.au; Hanex, 1300 795 708, hanex.com.au; Staron, (02) 9822 7055.

LAMINATE

Pros: This surface can mimic the look of every natural material imaginable and boasts superhero strength, plus it's relatively inexpensive. Purpose-designed benchtop laminates are anti-bacterial, moisture-resistant and extra durable, so they will last for some years.

Cons: It won't look or feel quite like the real thing, nor will it stay looking good for quite as long. High-gloss finishes tend to show marks and the joins can harbour bacteria. Special care needs to be taken around moist areas where there are joins to defend against possible lifting or peeling.

Expect to pay: From \$40 to \$300/linear metre (depending on the thickness and finish), fabricated and fully installed.

Contact: Laminex, 132 136, laminex.com.au; Gunnersens, gunnersens.com.au.

STAINLESS STEEL

Pros: Stainless steel scores top marks with serious cooks as it lends the look of a professional kitchen and can cope with even the toughest cooking challenge. It's hygienic, easy to clean, and heat- and stain-resistant.

It looks great alongside other materials, such as timber and glass, and it fits in well with the current 'mix and match' trend in kitchens.

Cons: It scratches easily and shows every mark, but in time these blend to form an eye-catching patina. A textured finish can be more forgiving.

Expect to pay: From \$750/sqm, fully installed.

Contact: A stainless-steel fabricator; try Bell Stainless, (07) 5476 8877; Fuzion Fabrications, (03) 9464 3435.

style in a flash

If your kitchen has good structural bones but you can't bear the look of your circa 1970s laminate benchtop, don't despair.

“Consider using a stone veneer fitted over the existing benchtop. There are limited colour options but it can achieve a fantastic result,” says interior designer Caroline Bury of Bury and Kirkland. Try the range at Granite Transformations; visit granitetransformations.com.au.

Companies, such as Ikea, also provide a large range of affordable benchtops that can be ready-made or bought as a standard size and cut down to fit. Just make sure you hire a reputable tradesperson to inspect the existing benchtop before you attempt to do it yourself.

STONE

Pros: With their intricate veins and dramatic swirls, natural stones such as granite and marble provide instant wow factor. As a kitchen surface, granite tends to perform better than marble as it's more durable and less susceptible to scratching. However, both stones are heat-resistant and, with care, will last you a lifetime.

Cons: Each piece is unique so matching slabs can be tricky and joins are often visible. Both marble and, to a lesser degree, granite are porous and will need regular sealing to prevent liquids penetrating.

Expect to pay: Granite from \$600 to \$1000/sqm, fully installed; marble from \$950 to \$1500/sqm, fully installed.

Contact: A local kitchen supplier, a local stone supplier, or try Stone Italiana, stoneitaliana.com.au; Rococo Stoneworks, rococostoneworks.com.au; Gitani Stone, gitanistone.com.au.

ENGINEERED STONE

Pros: If you crave the luxe look of stone but can't stretch the budget, engineered stone, as seen left with the CaesarStone bench by Art of Kitchens, is a cheaper, low-maintenance option. Made from 95 per cent quartz and resin, engineered stone comes in a dazzling array of hues and patterns, and can be moulded to suit any space. It's a non-porous surface, so will not need sealing, and is heat, scratch and stain resistant to boot.

Cons: If it's the natural flaws and idiosyncrasies of natural stone that you love, an engineered version probably isn't right for you – it has a uniformity of colour that can look dull by comparison. Edges are prone to chipping and repairs can be costly.

Expect to pay: From \$450 to \$600/sqm, fully installed.


Contact: CaesarStone, 1300 119 119, caesarstone.com.au; SmartStone, smartstone.com.au; Quantum Quartz, quantumquartz.com.au; Art of Kitchens, (02) 9980 9387.

TREND ALERT: CONCRETE

Pros: One of the biggest emerging trends in kitchens right now is concrete benchtops. Each surface is handmade and can resemble a work of art. It looks and feels wonderful, can be made to any shape and finish, is strong, and with care, will last forever.

Cons: This is an ultra-expensive surface. It is also extremely heavy, so your kitchen supplier will need to know if you're going for concrete to ensure your units can support the weight. While it is long-lasting, concrete is porous, and prone to staining and water damage, so it will require regular sealing to help maintain its good looks.

Expect to pay: From \$1800/sqm, fully installed.

Contact: 2barrows, 0423 111 177, 2barrows.com; Kitcheners Kitchens, 1800 826 144, kitcheners.com.au; Concrete Blonde, 0425 742 288, concretebenchtops.com.au. 



1. Easy-care Corian in Lava Rock adds texture in this kitchen by Ikal Kitchens. 2. Get the look of concrete for less with Laminex's Squareform. 3. Marble's natural beauty delivers glamour. 4. Stainless steel dovetails well with other surfaces. 5. Concrete offers texture and durability. Opposite: This CaesarStone engineered stone surface is a sophisticated finish.

