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WHEN PAM CALDWELL decided to replace the 30-year-old laminate countertops in her kitchen, she was sure she wanted granite. Then she looked at quartz and never looked back.

"Why are people buying granite when they could have quartz? It's just as beautiful, but no maintenance," says Pam, whose Hickory home now boasts 48 square feet of gleaming countertops in a dark-brown, gold-flecked pattern that she herself originally mistook for granite.

A lot of people seem to be thinking like Pam. Quartz is said to be the fastest-growing type of countertop material in the nation, and it is showing up as of late in more and more Pittsburgh-area kitchens. Comparable in price to granite – roughly \$50-\$90 a square foot, installed -- quartz is marketed as an easy-care alternative that washes up quickly, resists stains and scorching, and, unlike granite, never requires sealing.

"It's a very durable surface, very family-friendly," says Laura Reid Riggin, sales manager for Premier Home Design Center in Bridgeville. It holds up under heavy use and little attention – standard practice in many households today, she notes: "Kitchens now are more family-centered. They are used for entertainment, for homework, for arts and crafts. It's not your grandmother's kitchen anymore."

QUARTZ'S ORIGINS

Though quartz surfaces often look like granite, they are not quarried but factory-made. Quartz crystals are mixed with bonding agents and pigment, then compressed into a slab, which later is cut

according to the customer's specifications.

The result is "engineered stone" with a composition of 93 percent quartz. It is even harder than granite, which typically is 40-60 percent quartz. And it is non-porous, whereas granite, marble and other stones formed solely by nature must be treated periodically to create a watertight seal.

Quartz surfaces are uniform in size, color and pattern. They're made in large slabs, about 10 feet by 5 feet, so they can be installed with fewer seams than natural stone; a large kitchen island, for instance, could be made of a single piece. Any two slabs of a given pattern have the same mottling, consistent from one end to the other.

For a homeowner who delights in the unique and unpredictable beauty of granite, quartz's uniformity may be off-putting. But it's seen as an advantage by customers who would rather choose their countertops from easy-to-compare store samples than search through warehouses for the perfect slab of all-natural stone.

STUMBLING ON QUARTZ

That was the case for Pam and her husband, Doug. "We looked at hundreds of (granite) slabs," Pam says. "We left (the warehouse), and I said to my husband, 'I don't like any of those.' "

The Caldwells "stumbled on" quartz at the Pittsburgh Home and Garden Show earlier this year, when they glimpsed a countertop that looked to them like natural stone. That pattern – Nottingham, made by Cambria – was what they ended up buying for their L-shaped kitchen.

"There is not one seam," even in the 3-by-4-foot island that doubles as a buffet table for family gatherings, Pam says. The Caldwells have a son at home and two daughters out on their own.

While she likes quartz's low maintenance, Pam bought it for its looks. "When I walk into my kitchen in the morning, I just smile," she says.

IN DEMAND

Nationwide, quartz is the fastest growing market segment in the countertop industry, outstripping materials such as granite, laminate and tile, according to the Freedonia Group, a Cleveland-based research company. Locally, Tom Trzcinski, of Trzcinski Design Group, says quartz makes up about 10 percent of his kitchen countertop sales now, up from zero two years ago, while Laura says Premier's quartz sales are up 60 percent in the last five years.

Maybe the economy has something to do with it, as homeowners, by many accounts, opt to stay put in their current houses and upgrade rather than try to sell them. Or maybe people have been reading Consumer Reports magazine, which has favorably cited quartz countertops for their low maintenance and stain resistance.

QUARTZ IN THE 'BURGH

There is a lot of competition in the quartz business. Big names include Zodiaq, Silestone, Caesarstone and Cambria, a relatively new player that expanded into western Pennsylvania this year. Family-owned, Minnesota-based Cambria is the only company to produce quartz surfaces in the United

Quartz.

*It's what's new
for kitchen
countertops.*

by Cynthia Navadeh
photo by Heather Mull

States, says Summer Kath, director of marketing. The company began in 2001, when members of the Davis family – for 60 years operators of a cheese-manufacturing business that is a major supplier to Kraft Foods – saw an opportunity to diversify.

Anticipating market growth, Cambria has invested \$45 million to expand the Minnesota plant where it produces its slabs. A year and a half ago, it built a facility in Cleveland, from which it now is “radiating out” to new markets in the country’s interior, including the Pittsburgh area, Summer says. The company sells its products solely through independent kitchen and bath retailers, rather than big-box stores.

At present, the kitchen is king when it comes to quartz. Eighty percent of Cambria’s sales, for instance, are for kitchen countertops, Summer says. But quartz producers hope that homeowners will start to use quartz in other parts of the house – for wet bars, bathroom vanities, shower and tub enclosures, and fireplace surrounds – and that more professional chefs will embrace quartz.

Even sports fans are a target market. As part of its branding strategy, Cambria established Café Cambria, a food and beverage concession at Air Canada Center, home of the Toronto Maple Leafs and Toronto Raptors. A similar approach might appeal to sports-loving Pittsburghers, Summer says. >>>



THE LOOK OF QUARTZ

The color and pattern of a quartz surface depend on the color and size of its component crystals. Larger crystals result in a mottled look, smaller ones in a more subtle pattern. Whatever their size, crystals should be clear, not cloudy, so the added pigment can shine through, says Summer.

While granite replicas are popular, quartz surfaces come in an array of colors, such as "Apple Martini" and "Magenta Energy." Some surfaces simulate the texture of leather.

More varieties are in the pipeline. Cambria expects to add 16 colors this fall to the 48 it already has, and Premier's Laura Reid Riffin looks forward to a growing slate of choices from many manufacturers, particularly more matte finishes.

PITTSBURGH PREFERENCES

Whether Pittsburghers will opt for such bold choices is unclear. Most Premier clients opt for "granite look-alikes," with larger particulates that mimic stone, in earthy colors and glossy finishes, Laura says.

That's what Cambria expects in the western Pennsylvania market. In general, Summer says, customers on the West and East Coasts favor a "modern, clean, monochromatic look," while those living between the coasts prefer stone-like patterns in creams and browns – "something they can live with for a long time."

Tom Trzcinski, a certified master kitchen and bath designer, agrees that neutrals are most popular. But quartz lends itself to contemporary design, and there's more of that in western Pennsylvania than you might think, he says.

Take Ziad and Nada Khoury, for instance. The contemporary home they built two years ago in Hollidaysburg, near Altoona, has a "clean, seamless design," Ziad says. "There's little woodwork. It has an industrial feeling." To set off their aluminum-finish kitchen cabinets, they opted for Silestone's Stellar Snow, a pattern that Ziad describes as "a white matrix with pieces of what looks like stainless steel."

Though durability is a welcome feature in a household with four children ages 6, 9, 10 and 12, the Khourys chose quartz for its appearance.

"We like the minimal look," Ziad says. "Granite is nice if you're looking for natural. Quartz has a contemporary, clean look to it."

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAMBRIA

In general, Trzcinski says, young and old Pittsburghers like quartz, the middle-aged not so much. Clients up to the age of, say, 35, like high-impact but "minimalistic" kitchens; they'll keep existing cabinets and put their money into high-end countertops and appliances, slapping on a coat of paint for visual punch. Clients age 55 and over, many of them empty-nesters, also like quartz because it's "simple and easy to take care of," Tom says.

QUARTZ'S COST

While a ballpark price for quartz countertops is \$50-\$90 per square foot installed, that can vary depending on the number of cut-outs required for sinks and such. Different colors, finishes and edges may also change the price, though Cambria's marketing strategy is to charge the same price for all.

Granite, probably quartz's biggest competitor, is priced in the same range as quartz, though high-end granite slabs can go as high as \$300 per square foot. Laminate, a more economical choice, typically runs \$10-\$30.

The Caldwell's quartz countertops cost \$4,900, enough to worry Pam at first. "The night before (it was installed), I was lying in bed, thinking it was a lot of money," she says. Now that it's in, she has no regrets: "We totally love it." •

