

HARD-WORKING KITCHENS

that are Easy on You

by Lisa M. Jensen

If there's one thing that's better than a spacious new kitchen packed with character, it's a spacious new kitchen that cleans itself. But until that hits the market, consider design solutions and durable products geared to keep the heart of your home easy to care for – and even easier to love.

FLOORS Vinyl flooring has come a long way from a generation ago when it easily scratched. Today's engineered polymer products are a combination of science and nature's inspirations. These no-wax floors are extremely versatile, durable and easy to maintain.

Armstrong and Congoleum offer resilient flooring collections mimicking slate, sisal, limestone and linen, among many other materials. Thanks to a protective nylon and aluminum oxide finish, designer lines including Ultima (Congoleum) and Destinations (Armstrong) hold up well beneath an active family. Congoleum's new Xclusive line also features Scotchgard Protector built-in soil and stain repellent. All of these floors can just be swept as needed, and mopped on occasion. Grey and earth toned hues hide dirt best. Avoid designs with indentations, which can collect grime.

Laminate is a practical choice if you own a pet (particularly a dog). Comprised of protective aluminum oxide, dense resin-based melamine and a waterproof, wood composition-based core, laminate flooring doesn't scratch, burn, scuff or stain without a lot of effort. It's also easily cleaned – a quick sweep or round with the vacuum does the trick. Felt protectors under bar stools or dining room chairs help protect laminate, and cork underlayment or other specialty padding can reduce the faint echo effect sometimes noticed.

If you opt for highly durable, moisture resistant ceramic tile, choose a darker grout

to minimize cleaning. If the tiles aren't glazed, be sure to seal your floor to protect it against stains.

Real wood floors add warmth to any room and resale value to your home. Spills should be dried up immediately. Even wood protected by urethane will still need to be refinished periodically. Steel wool or sandpaper can be used to buff out most scratches and stains before refinishing.

SINKS Most of the action in your kitchen takes place at the sink, so it pays to think about how you really use it.



A deep double bowl handles food prep and clean up simultaneously – place your disposal in the larger side. If you like to can fresh produce, you may prefer a triple bowl, reserving a smaller sink for the disposal. If you usually prepare food on an island, you may wish to include a smaller prep sink there and complement it with a big farmhouse sink to accommodate large pots and pans you'll wash by hand.

Integrated sinks (those made from countertop material) and under mounted bowls provide fast, over-the-edge access to the disposal. Both models also prevent water from seeping under the sink edge and creating mold.

For the best durability, choose a sink made from nonporous material. Stainless steel with a high amount of nickel and chromium will retain its brightness and resist dents and dings. While stainless bowls won't stain, they do need to be wiped dry promptly if you wish to avoid water spots. Manufacturers such as Franke USA cover bowl bottoms with sound-deadening pads to insulate stainless sink bottoms from excess vibration and noise.

Sinks comprised of man-made composite materials are notably durable and low-maintenance. Franke USA combines quartz crystals and acrylic resin to form beautiful sinks with the radiance of natural stone that won't stain, chip or scratch. Swanstone also offers these rock-solid quartz sinks, as well as solid surface bowls. Both options hold up against stains, dropped items and considerable heat. Porcelain-coated cast iron bowls are surprisingly durable as well.

Look for sinks that feature easy clean-up features, flowing workspaces with built-in drains, removable racks that let dishes drip dry over the bowl and custom cutting boards that rest directly over the bowl so scraps can easily be swiped down a hole to the disposal.

FAUCETS AND WATER SOFTENERS

An American Water Works Association study shows that, without a water softener, hard water cuts the life of faucets by 40% and of dishwashers by 30%. If hard water is an issue in your home, guard against damage to your dishes and faucets by having a water softener installed. Otherwise, your faucets will quickly become corroded and weathered looking.

APPLIANCES With its professional appeal and durability, stainless steel remains a popular finish. Still, keeping stainless appliances free of fingerprints can require



photo courtesy of MedallionCabinetry.com

daily maintenance. While there are a variety of specialty cleaners available, a more livable alternative to consider is vinyl-coated metal.

Various manufacturers now offer a version of this finish. Whirlpool introduced Satina Stainless Look Finish, which resists fingerprints and adds sleek elegance. Samsung also offers a similar finish that wards off smudges but lends stainless appeal. No special cleaners are needed to keep these appliances

looking new. Another perk? Magnets stick.

White and other light-colored finishes are easier to maintain over black and regular stainless steel.

■ **Refrigerators.** Look for those outfitted with adjustable slide-out glass shelves that guard against spills, removable door bins that can be loaded with condiments and toted to the table, an in-door, ice dispensing system with a removable ice bucket, sliding

ABOVE: With its clean, simple lines, Medallion's Misson-styled Oak Park cabinetry simplifies cleaning. Earth tone tiles above the cooktop will show less splatters – particularly if they are well-glazed.

OPPOSITE LEFT: Swanstone's quartz kitchen sinks are virtually indestructible. Under normal use, they will not scratch, chip or stain. For added flexibility, they can be installed as drop-ins or undermounts.

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photo courtesy of Whirlpool.com

brackets on door shelves that hold bottles and jars steady and slide-out drawers for quicker cleaning.

■ **Cooktops and Ranges.** Ceramic glass surfaces resist chipping and cracking, and scratches can generally be buffed off (although you'll need to wait until the unit cools before wiping it off completely with sudsy water or a specialty cleaner). Smooth, magnetic-induction cooktops can readily be wiped clean since they remain cool to the touch. Looking for even less maintenance? Some manufacturers, including Whirlpool, offer sealed gas burners to keep spills on the surface and also feature porcelain-coated, glossy cast-iron grates, which are designed to maintain their luster despite frequent use.

■ **Dishwashers.** Dual-drawers and specially designed interior racks can make this kitchen convenience an even bigger time saver. For smaller kitchens, Maytag offers a Jetclean Portable Dishwasher that includes a practical, space-saving butcher-block top.

■ **Microwaves.** Not much is worse than having to scrape dried splatter off microwave walls. For swift clean up, keep a specialty cleaner like Rubbermaid's Foaming Orange Cleaner & Degreaser nearby.

■ **Hoods.** Keeping your kitchen clear of unwanted smoke, grease, steam and other byproducts requires use of a properly sized vent. An appropriately powered vent, which should extend three inches over either side of your range, helps protect cabinetry and countertops from acquiring a greasy film. Island vents should be larger than cooktops to compensate for additional airflow in this space, and structural allowances should be consid-

ered for venting above commercial ranges in a home setting. In addition, be sure hood fans are vented to the outside of your home, rather than a garage, crawl or attic space.

CABINETS While the right vent will go a long way toward protecting your cabinetry, choosing durable cabinetry is your best bet. The Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association (KCMA) sponsors a nationally recognized voluntary testing and certification program for cabinetry makers. Five structural tests measure a cabinet's internal integrity and quality of installation. Drawers and doors must also pass inspection to earn a seal. What are features of durable cabinetry? For details, go to www.KCMA.org.

Manufacturers such as Medallion Cabinetry, Inc., offer a low-maintenance thermofoil finish that resists grease, grime, smudges and smears. Smooth woods, like maple in a flat full overlay door design, are the easiest to wipe clean with a damp cloth – and won't collect as much dust.

Consider opaque, seeded or otherwise textured glass insets rather than clear glass to hold maintenance at bay.

COUNTERTOPS Non-porous solid surface countertops are easy to live with in the kitchen. A variety of manufacturers offers dozens of design options that can be buffed if scratched, but be aware that darker colors show scratches more readily. For the kitchen, opt for a matte finish, which is maintained more easily than satin and gloss. Trivets and cutting boards are recommended to protect solid surfacing.



photo courtesy of MedallionCabinetry.com

ABOVE: These stippled glass panels in Medallion's Cardiff maple cabinetry will show less streaks and fingerprints than smooth glass.

LEFT: Whirlpool Gold's freestanding electric range features a brushed stainless steel finish that shows fewer fingerprints and a smooth cooktop for easier cleaning.

Versatile and durable, concrete is also making its way into kitchens. Tinted in almost any color and waxed, it offers much creative flexibility as well. Like granite, it will need to be sealed periodically.

The least pricey option, plastic laminate comes in endless designs, can be customized in a number of edges and requires limited maintenance. Of course, sharp or heavy objects can chip it.

PAINT Because it's stain-resistant and can be wiped down with household cleaners, semi-gloss paint is generally preferred. Several paint manufacturers have created specialty lines for specific rooms. Dutch Boy, for example, offers Kitchen & Bath semi-gloss enamel that resists moisture and allows stains to be wiped up easily. The same company also offers DuraClean, which is extra "scrubbable."

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While a self-cleaning kitchen has yet to be developed, giving a little extra thought to the products you choose for your kitchen can provide extra savings in time and money for years to come. ■