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One cool cocktail from @17th,
downtown's newest club.



Invented by glass artist Don Macpherson, "Vetrazzo" is about as green as countertop material gets, since the core components are concrete and recycled glass.

Counter Intuitive

The Latest and
Greatest in
Kitchen Surfaces

PICKING OUT COUNTERS IS THE TOUGHEST PART of remodeling a kitchen. It can seem like everything on the market has some glaring downside. Granite has been done to death. Butcher block can't take the heat or exposure to moisture. Corian is a big wad of plastic, when you really think about it, and Formica is like being trapped in your middle-school cafeteria. Go with tile, and you'll be cursing grout lines for the rest of your life.

Luckily, the Bay Area is home to some of the world's most innovative countertop gurus, so four profiles of a few notables follow.

BY CORNELIA READ



Matthew Millman

"Good design makes this material compelling," says Cheng of concrete. The concrete counters in this kitchen add warmth to the décor.

The Man Who Makes Concrete Dance

There's a deceptively plain storefront on Berkeley's San Pablo Avenue, tucked beside a tattoo parlor. The small sign reading "Cheng Design" gives no hint of the spectacular work being done inside.

Fu-tung Cheng is widely considered the world's foremost concrete designer. The kitchens, baths and houses in which he has utilized the substance have garnered piles of prestigious awards. Cheng's work has been featured in publications ranging from *Sunset* to *The Wall Street Journal*, *Elle Décor* to *Consumer Reports*. Eleven design books have showcased his projects.

When Taunton Press published the book Cheng himself authored with Eric Olsen, "Concrete Countertops: Design, Forms and Finishes for the New Kitchen and Bath" in 2002, the designer conquered a new medium.

"The book's done really well," Cheng says, while filling tiny cups with the palest gold Dragonwell tea, adding, "110,000 copies have sold so far."

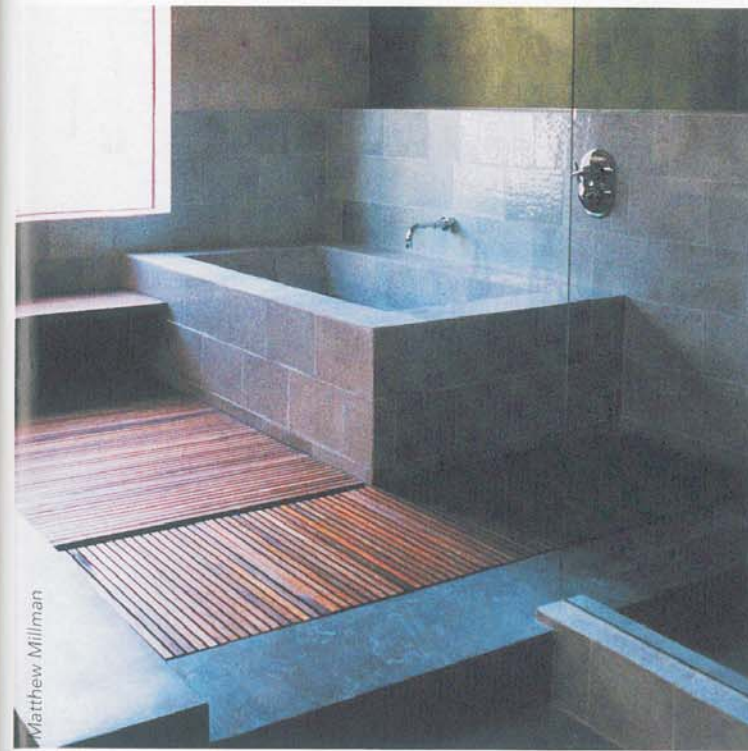
Cheng looks up and smiles. "At Builder's Booksources down on Fourth Street, they told me they call it their Harry Potter. That was really great to hear."

And no wonder. This is a man who's learned how to coax concrete into embodying its own Platonic ideal. His countertops are so subtly articulated they seem to float—sinuous as water but warm as a hearth.

One look at his work is enough to convince anyone of the man's talent. This cannot, one thinks, be the stuff of sidewalks and driveways. Cheng has raised the age-old, humble mixture of limestone and sand and water to iconic heights. But Cheng's virtuosity is not merely aesthetic—he's just as fierce about achieving technical rigor.

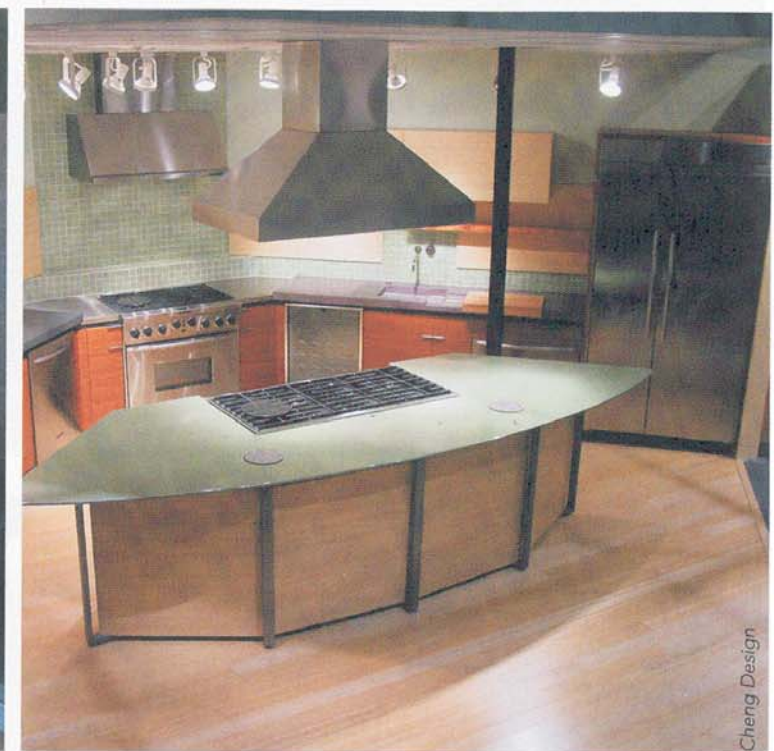
"We've been doing this for 15 years," he says. "We pioneered it, and people really look to us to keep the level of quality high." So high, in fact, that an August 2004 *Consumer Reports* article on countertops named Cheng Design as its sole example in the concrete category, rating the material itself "Best for Exclusivity."

It's not a perfect material, however.



Matthew Millman

Berkeley's concrete designer Fu-tung Cheng works wonders with limestone and sand.



Cheng Design

"Concrete has its own set of problems," Cheng readily admits. "It's vulnerable. It's porous. It can craze and get hairline cracks. But it's capable of a warmth you find in nothing else. We can take this matter and sculpt it, literally—we can create a landscape in the kitchen."

Indeed, his designs incorporate natural materials—pieces of slate and marble, bits of metal, the profile of a nautilus shell. Everything has a whiff of Joseph Cornell, that sense of standing at some juncture of the artifact and the futuristic.

"When you get it right, even the most fastidious people will accept this material's limitations," Cheng says. "You can have some staining—you have to watch it with the acids, especially. But somehow that seems integral."

As for maintenance, "We ask people to wax the surface once a month, and there's a lot of great technology that's come out of the granite and marble industry—small diamond pads, for instance, that can buff out imperfections like a stain or a contrast in texture. If you feel as though the surface has gained a little too much patina, say after five or eight years, we can repolish the whole piece."

Taunton will publish Cheng's second book, "Concrete at Home," in February 2005, but he's trying his hand at more than concrete. The Zephyr company recently asked him to design a series of metal stove hoods, all of which look poised to soar gracefully off the cliffs of Mars.

Cheng Design now markets DIY "Geocrete" concrete mixes, pre-tinted in a variety of colors. Design and contracting professionals, as well as curious homeowners, can attend one- or five-day workshops on site. The shorter version gives an

overview of concrete fabrication, from form-building to installation. During the five-day class, students are broken into groups of three and complete their own design in the medium. They draw straws to decide who takes home the piece.

To encourage innovation and to further appreciation of this work as an artisanal craft, Cheng has formed a subscription-based trade group called the Concrete Exchange.

"I do get pigeonholed into kitchen design quite a bit," Cheng says. "I see this work as part of a broader aesthetic. It's great when we get to do a structure from the ground up. We tend to think of concrete as something cold and abrasive, but good design transforms it. Good design makes this material compelling, and warm—it shows us possibility."

Resin d'Etre

Across the bay in San Francisco, artist Marcia Stuermer has turned her hand to that material famously recommended to Dustin Hoffman's character Benjamin Braddock in "The Graduate": plastics.

Stuermer's Fossil Faux Studios produces work surfaces, room dividers and furniture from a proprietary blend of resins that's impervious to scratches, dings and damage from heat that's anywhere shy of thermonuclear. Used as a counter or bartop, this material is rated tremendously safe for food-prep, but it's not the practicality customers fall for; it's the look.

Stuermer uses the resin as a showcase—trapping objects and materials inside the stuff like its some kind of Post-Modern amber. The opening image on her website is a shot of backlit translucent