

EUROPAMERICAN, INC.

Ceramic Tile and Marble
96 East Franklin Street
Centerville, Ohio 45459
937 439 1485

GROUT--IT'S A "PIECE OF CAKE"

As a dealer/contractor specializing in ceramic tile and marble for a number of years, a question that seems to constantly arise is: "What about the Grout?" Meaning of course - "Do I have to have grout with my tile," or, "Will my grout always look as dirty as my friend, Sue's?" Or perhaps, "Will I have to scrub my grout on my hands and knees with little to show for my efforts like my other friend, Mary?"

An analogy that appears to help our clients understand grout a little better and to address the above grout questions starts with a piece of cake! Cake is just flour, sugar, eggs and a liquid. After the oven drives the moisture away and if the top crust is cut off, the cake has a honeycomb appearance with a lot of big and little half bubbles or holes on the surface.

Standard Grout (as opposed to Epoxy or other special purpose grout) is a mixture of Portland cement, colorant, a liquid and sometimes sand, depending whether it is a floor or wall tile or if it is to be used for marble or ceramic tile. After the liquid evaporates the appearance of the grout is not unlike that of the cake that we described above. Just as the appearance of a pound cake would look different than an angel food cake or a cake that was under or over cooked would look different, grout will look different depending on how it was mixed, cured, or the kind of liquid that was used to mix it with.

If you took the cake out of the oven, cut the top off and placed it on the countertop for a number of days, a number of bad things would happen (unless, of course, the ants or the dog got there first and ate it!). First of all if the cake wasn't protected by a cover or a frosting or filled with brandy it would become stale. It would also most likely collect dust and dirt and become discolored as the little half bubbles or holes were exposed to the elements. Similarly, the holes or half bubbles in grout will become discolored if not protected by a topical sealer(frosting) or penetrating sealer(brandy) to either cover the holes or fill them so that dirt or other discoloring substances can effect the appearance of the grout.

Obviously the holes in an angel food cake would collect more dirt than the holes in the more dense pound cake. In either case, even if the cake became so stale as to almost rock hard it would be very, very difficult to clean the cake by rubbing a rag over the top. All the filled holes would hold on to their dirt and the rag would at best just move dirt from one hole to the other. When mopping tile the rougher surfaced grout in effect cleans off the dirty mop water from the mop and further fills itself up with dirt. If someone challenged me to clean a cake I guess the best approach, other than not getting it dirty in the first place, would be to use a liquid to loosen the dirt and then a strong vacuum to pull the dirt up out of the holes. The same process works best for dirty grout, either don't get it dirty in the first place, or use a solution to loosen the dirt and a vacuum to pick up the dirty solution from out of the holes.

Over the years after similar discussions with our clients we have developed a six part solution to the "grout problem":

1. Use narrow grout lines - if the tile dimensions are true, consider using 1/8 to 1/4" grout lines - obviously the narrower the grout lines the less grout that you will have to deal with over the years! In addition, what you are buying is the benefits of tile not grout so try to get more of the "good stuff" that you are paying for and less of the grout.

2. Use a grout additive instead of water. When you use a grout additive you make the equivalent of a pound cake rather than an angel food cake! Your holes are smaller and closer together so there is less area to become dirty! The additive will slow down and create a more uniform curing process which will result in a denser, stronger and better colored grout.

3. Use a darker grout color! I don't care what kind of sealer that you use or even what kind of grout, it is virtually impossible to keep bright white floor grout white. Just as it's easier to keep a chocolate cake clean as opposed to a white one a grout that is at least a shade or two darker than the color of the tile will be easier to maintain.

4. Use a stone or mottled colored tile or marble. Even when the world is perfect and the grout has been properly manufactured by the manufacturer and properly mixed and applied by the installer, it will then have a uniform color like the uniform color of a plain tile--for about a month! Since grout is a rough surface as compared to tile, even in the best of circumstances it will have a change of appearance due to wear and tear and the factors of everyday use. As the grout ages there will be changes in it's appearance. Tile does not generally change very much at all over time. So as time passes the grout color which may have perfectly matched the tile will move away from the tile color.

If you start out with a mottled colored tile it will look different than it's surrounding grout - for about a month! As the grout ages it will take up the mottling color of the tile and the floor will grow toward the same coloration over time.

5. Use bigger tile! Over 50% of our floor tile and over 20% of our wall tiles that are sold or 16x16 or larger. Bigger tiles mean less busy areas with less grout lines. It not only makes the area look bigger but you have substantially less grout!

6. Seal the grout! Just as not frosting the cake or filling it with a liquid to keep air and other matter out of it will lead to a stale dirty cake. Not sealing grout will have the same predictable results and more times than not cause those questions of the dissatisfied neighbor who had problems with her grout! If you don't protect you grout with a sealer it will become dirty and very difficult to maintain. An unfrosted and unprotected cake will not bring you or your family much pleasure after a very short period of time. An unsealed grout will similarly not bring you anything but difficulty after a very short period of time!

Our experience is that if you follow the above steps, taking care of your grout will be a "piece of cake!"