

INTERIORS
By CLARE NOLAN

TOO COOL FOR SCHOOL

Seats of learning don't come any more stylish than Casa McQueens in the idyllic Italian countryside, where you can hone your floristry skills, perfect your home-made pasta, or just sit back and enjoy the good life

Report CAROLINE ATKINS Photographs SIMON BROWN



From far left: Ercole and Kally outside Casa McQueens; the green paintwork in the upstairs corridor is typical of the region; a most welcoming breakfast table. Below: Kally and Ercole give a hands-on floristry class in the main living room, a converted stable block

Learning a new skill feels a lot less like hard work if you can do it in a beautiful setting with plenty of home comforts (a swimming pool and Jacuzzi never go amiss). And some skills lend themselves especially well to the holiday treatment, which is why the people behind the McQueens floristry business – Kally Ellis and Ercole Moroni – have decided to establish a new base among the olive groves and sunflower fields of the Le Marche region of eastern Italy. It's an area that feels like home to them both, Ercole because he grew up here – and his mother and sister still live within half-an-hour's drive – and Kally because it's where her parents brought her every summer as a child. So it was the perfect place to capture the colour and inspiration of the McQueens floristry school in a more exotic setting than Hackney, where their London school is based.

They found the 150-year-old farmhouse three years ago. 'It was never on the estate agents' books,' says Ercole, 'but friends of mine knew the count who owned it – who has a vineyard across the valley – and persuaded him that this project would be really good for the region.' They have been painstakingly restoring it with the help of a local architect. Thrilled to find clients who respect the spirit of the house, she has used authentic materials to maintain its clean, almost monastic, lines: locally quarried piombino clay tiles to create ceilings and floors in a subtle blend of pink, grey and ochre; walls finished in natural paints to let the plaster breathe; doors and latches copied from the originals (where they couldn't be salvaged); and traditional braided treccolo cabling running between the lovely old ceramic light switches.

A restorer was employed to trawl antiques markets to find simple furniture of the right period, so the house is scattered with refectory benches, little cane-seated chairs, authentic wooden breadmaking cabinets – or modie – and little writing desks with heavy old-fashioned





Left: the pool has fantastic views of the hill villages beyond. Opposite from top left: Ercole serves the wine while his sister Emanuela – Casa McQueens' cook and housekeeper – prepares fresh tagliatelle, to be served in the convivial dining room; you too could create this beautiful bouquet; the bedrooms feature antique wrought-iron beds and exquisite linens and blankets. This page, clockwise from top: a room with a view of olive groves and vineyards; a downstairs corner with writing desk and old-fashioned typewriter; one of the elegant bathrooms situated off each bedroom, featuring marble sink units and old metal latches on the doors; Ercole makes a selection from the wine cellar

← typewriters. Upstairs, the (mostly twin) bedrooms have antique metal-framed beds, wooden-shuttered windows, bathrooms with cool marble surfaces, and individual touches such as washstands topped with antique mirrors.

But it's all designed for practicality, not as a museum, so the upstairs guest kitchen is equipped with a discreet flat-screen TV as well as a huge rustic fireplace. The main living room, converted from the high-windowed stable block beyond the main house, has comfortable sofas, a piano and a football table, and the centrepiece of the 'school' kitchen is a sleek top-of-the-range steel cooker – because food is just as important as flowers in the McQueens experience. This is a region of working farmland and wonderful food ('We never eat a duck or chicken that isn't home-reared,' insists Ercole) and wine (the house has its own small vineyard, and is strategically positioned between three wine-growing villages), so part of the joy of staying here is the chance to learn from the locals and take back a real understanding of its riches.

In fact, you can learn as much, or as little, as you want – about more or less anything you want, because the idea of the house is to provide tailor-made holidays. So you can build in a shopping trip to the mediaeval coastal town of Senigallia, or a visit to the mountains or the astonishingly beautiful crystalline caves at Frasassi, as well as receive

expert tuition in anything from food and floristry to swimming or yoga. But you won't really want to take much time off when learning is as entertaining as this, watching Ercole assemble perfect bouquets with a few deft flicks of asters, begonias and pale green hydrangeas from the local market (plus sunflowers during June and early July, when the fields are full of them). And you can't watch his sister make fresh tagliatelle from local flour and orange-yolked eggs without wanting to have a go yourself; or eat her brodetto di pesce della costa (an amazingly rich soup made from 13 varieties of fish and seafood) without finding out exactly how to make it; or taste the local wines without asking endless questions about the grapes and the soil and why it has that wonderful peach flavour.

So you might as well resign yourself to going back to school, and just make the most of your surroundings. Here, the vegetable garden slopes down into the valley, the fruit trees are laden with pears, plums, dates and cherries, and the view from the pool is a horizon topped with church towers, while multicoloured fields tumble down from the ridge and fold into one another like ingredients in a mixing bowl. This is as desirable as school can get. **N**

● Casa McQueens is a 30-minute drive from Ancona airport. For more information, visit www.casamcqueens.com or call 020 7251 5505



BACK TO SCHOOL IN STYLE

Learn a multitude of skills from London designers at the top of their class

By Karen Smith

● Fancy learning from the designers whose products adorn the most glamorous of stores? Cockpit Arts in Holborn offers expert tuition in jewellery design, screenprinting, millinery, silversmithing and making leather fashion accessories. For more information, visit www.designercourses.co.uk.

● Annabel Lewis, director and creative force behind trimmings emporium VV Rouleaux, offers a one-day tassel-making workshop at her Marylebone Road shop on 14 September. Learn how to make tassels, pompons and tassel hangers. £150 per day, including lunch and materials. Tel: 020 7627 4455; www.vvrouleaux.com

● Learn truffle-making, the art of moulding chocolate or how to create indulgent chocolate desserts with Chantal Coady at the Rococo Chocolates factory in East Dulwich. Each one-day course costs £175, including lunch, chocolate tasting and a goody bag. Tel: 020 8761 8456; e-mail: courses@rococochocolates.com; www.rococochocolates.com

● Anne Kyrrö Quinn shares her experimental approach to the art of felt-making at her Oxo Tower studio this autumn. £70 per day, including materials. Tel: 020 7021 0702; e-mail: info@annekyrroqueinn.com; www.annekyrroqueinn.com

● Why pay for an interior designer when you could learn the skills yourself? The KLC School of Design offers full- and part-time courses and one-day workshops in interior design and decoration, and garden design. For more information, tel: 020 7376 3377; www.klc.co.uk



Flower power comes to Italy

A stylish new retreat in Le Marche is offering courses in floristry and a taste of traditional country life. **Rupert Mellor** report

Ercole! Ercole! Ercole! The smile that's usually a permanent fixture on the face of Ercole Moroni slips slightly, as he wipes sweat from his forehead with a muddy hand. All my life, I loved my name. Recently, I start to change my mind. Moroni catches his breath between watering the 284 plants he has bedded in his weekend and briefing two electricians, a gardener and a pool man. "Ercole, where does this go?" "Ercole, how do we do this?" Ercole this, Ercole that, he sighs, and rolls his eyes. "I adore this place, but I can hardly remember a day when there weren't a million decisions to make. I can't wait for it to be finished!"

Ercole's usual job is at McQueens, the chic florist in Clerkenwell, London, which he and business partner Kally Ellis established in 1991. It has become the de rigueur dresser of *Vanity Fair*'s legendary post-Oscars parties and regular supplier to luvvies including Swyneth Paltrow and Graham Norton. I met him last autumn in the Le Marche region of eastern central Italy where he grew up, as he was overseeing finishing touches to his firm's latest venture, Casa McQueens. Three years ago he bought a ruined 19th-century farmhouse 20 miles from Ancona, and a painstaking, environmentally-conscious transformation began. Last week, it opened as a venue for courses in floristry, cookery, art and yoga, or to be let as a holiday home to groups of up to 15.

A glimpse of a simpler, gentler way of life is the experience McQueens aims to offer, and from the mighty, recycled oak beams to the authentic colours of the gesso-finished walls, the casa is a serene celebration of regional traditions. Its seven airy bedrooms have large, iron beds, some with antique bedlinen, the unused wedding present of an old lady from a neighbouring village. The large living space features comfortable sofas, card tables, an old piano and a rare, original table football set won by a month-long charm offensive from the owner of a local bar. Concessions to 21st-century luxury include a modern therapy space, all cool, concrete lines and waterfall-style showers, a jasmine-fringed, eight-person Jacuzzi and infinity pool with views over rolling farmland whose fields change colour each month with the ripening of successive crops of artichokes, wild asparagus, tomatoes and sunflowers. Apple, pear, olive, prune, apricot and cherry trees are planted in the casa's grounds, fragrant rosemary bushes and bay trees line the stone footpaths, and among the vines growing here is the fragola, named for the strawberry flavour of its grapes.

"Everybody told us we were mad," says Moroni. "We made our lives extremely difficult by insisting on original everything. Now they all come and see. My mother and my aunt are here all the time. They think it is paradise; just as houses were when they were young girls."

"Ercole!" In the doorway, an apron-clad Mamuna Moroni and her sister-in-law Marisa stand laden with bags of fruit, vegetables, eggs and herbs harvested



Clockwise from above: professional florist Ercole Moroni gives a lesson using regional flowers; the country around the casa; and one of the bedrooms. Photographs by Simon Brown

My mother and aunt think it is paradise; it is just as houses were when they were young girls

the way and swiftly dominate the huge kitchen. Flipping up the lid of a traditional pasta maker, Claudina gets to work on what, after hours of labour, will be sheets of pasta so fine they're all but transparent.

From peasant classics such as *tagliatelle ai piselli* to seasonal delicacies like rabbit in porchetta, Claudina and Marisa are authorities on the area's rustic cuisine: terrain and soil here vary so much that local specialities change every 10 miles. The finest ingredients are guaranteed by their lifelong knowledge of the shops and markets, and the same twinkly-eyed flirtations with suppliers which secure access to reserved stock and the odd courtesy item.

While local people may tut good-humouredly at recent media claims to

aware and proud of their cultural heritage, and gracious when visitors take interest. Traditionally a hard-working, left-wing region, its landscape punctuated by monuments to those who died fighting Mussolini, Le Marche has remained gratifyingly un-international.

Yet there are world-class tourist attractions – the spectacular, cathedral-like limestone cave network at Frasassi, the pilgrimage site of Loreto with its famous black Madonna, and the seven-mile Spiaggia di Velluto (Velvet Beach) at Senigallia, which adds a young, sexy edge to the town's mix of historic streets hip bars and elegant boutiques.

But unique riches lie in the immaculate, unspoiled and arts-rich hill towns. The Renaissance hub of Urbino and the spectacularly fortified Corinaldo are among the more famous names, but any

number of picturesque places within a short drive have wisteria-shaded squares unchanged for decades, plus priceless finds such as the spit-and-sawdust backroom restaurant of the grocer on the road to Belvedere Ostrense.

There's also a charming anomaly or two. On Belvedere Ostrense's stone-paved town hall square, where old boys chat, smoke and sip cappuccino as they have for generations, there's a coffee bar straight out of London's too-cool-for-school Shoreditch district, staffed by a young woman in two-tone metallic eye-

shadow, clashing Eighties Day-Glo prints and three cohabiting hairstyles.

Back at the casa, numbers for lunch have swollen to 10 as friends and relatives have dropped by, to muck in, or just say ciao. As Moroni helps the two women to serve, he reveals the mantra he is relying on to see him through the house's last days of preparations: "It's inspired by air stewardesses. They can smile through anything." As he helps me to a plate of fried courgette flowers, he flashes a dazzling Stepford Wife special. "Chicken or beef? Tea or coffee?"

ESSENTIALS

Casa McQueens (020 7251 5505; www.casamcqueens.com) is available to let all year, from £7,000 a week (for up to 15 people). Catering and maid service can be arranged. Ryanair (www.ryanair.co.uk) runs a daily flight from London Stansted to Ancona. There are two consecutive, one-week floristry and cookery courses at the casa from 17 June, at £1,500 a head, which includes

italy

the no.1 magazine for lovers of all things italian

Issue 38
May 2006
£3.65

www.italymag.co.uk



ITALY HOLIDAYS



CASA ERCOLE

Le Marche's latest attraction explored by *Rupert Mellor*



WHEN AN 18-YEAR-OLD Ercole Moroni kissed his family goodbye in the tiny hilltown of Castellaro with London in his sights, he never imagined the circumstances in which he would one day be coming home. Yet 22 years later McQueens, the London-based florist which he set up with business partner Kally Ellis in 1991, has a client list including

Gucci, Harrods and Knightsbridge's Berkeley Hotel, delivers to the homes of Gwyneth Paltrow, Graham Norton and Isabella Blow and has for the last ten years dressed Vanity Fair's legendary post-Oscars parties at Morton's restaurant in Hollywood.

From June 17th, Ercole will be sharing his skills on his old stomping grounds, at Casa McQueens, an impeccably restored 19th-century farmhouse just outside the cute medieval town of Belvedere Ostrenze, whose launch this year as a luxury holiday home for hire marks a new departure for his company. There, ably supported by his mother Claudina and aunt Marisa on gastronomic duties, he will teach guests how to bring a designer eye to arrangements for the huge communal dining table, bouquets for their bedrooms and posies using the freshest seasonal goodies from local flower markets and the *casa's* own grounds.

BACK TO IT'S FORMER GLORY
Sitting on its own hillock in the area of Le Marche which the 14th-century poet Cecco d'Ascoli described as *'il bel paese de li dolci colli'* (the beautiful country of gentle hills), the *casa* was a sorry sight when Ercole and

Kally, initially looking for a summer retreat for Kally's family, first found it. An 18-month, painstaking restoration followed, using traditional and where possible recycled materials. The vast oak roof beams were stripped down and put back in place, walls were finished in old-fashioned gesso, and replacement 220-year-old *pianelle* tiles were sourced from a defunct local disco. Discovering that builders relaying an old stone footpath had repaired a hole where a rambling rose had grown, Ercole ordered the offending slab be broken, and jewel-red roses once again climb the adjacent wall.

Ercole's hands-on role in the house's transformation offered him plenty of opportunity to rebond with his close, large family, nearly all of whom still live locally. Cousins, siblings, uncles and aunts took on duties from wiring to painting to gardening while Ercole's mother Claudina and her sister-in-law and constant companion Marisa bustled into the kitchen most mornings, laden with bags of vegetables, eggs and herbs from their own gardens to cook up rustic specialities for the day's workforce.

FINEST ORGANIC PRODUCE
Now the two *signore*, who are absolute authorities on Le Marche's rich culinary traditions, from simple fried courgette flowers to *broadetto a l'anconetana*, a speciality made from

Shared delight of our Italian second home

Business partners Kally Ellis and Ercole Moroni reveal how they managed to stay friends during the trials of buying a joint property. **Lesley Gillilan** reports

When Kally Ellis first set eyes on the semi-derelict Italian farmhouse she now knows as Casa McQueens, she knew it was the place for her. "I had seen several properties over one weekend," she recalls. "I didn't like any of them, and I was getting despondent."

Then, at the end of the last day, she was guided down a dirt track a few miles from Belvedere Ostrense, a medieval hill-town in the Le Marche region, and saw on the hillside below a barn-like stone house set in a patchwork of rolling farmland dotted with fruit and olive trees. "I took one look at it and thought, yes, this is the one."

Fortunately her partner Ercole Moroni agreed with her, because this was a joint purchase. And although their relationship is strictly business (Ellis and Moroni are the two halves of celebrated London florist McQueens), the Italian house had to be "the one" for both buyers.

"Everything Ercole and I

do is split down the middle, fifty-fifty," Kally explains. "Nobody has the last say; we have to agree on every detail."

The purchase of Casa McQueens was, in essence, a business venture. Completed last year, it is marketed as a "luxury lifestyle retreat", offering residential floristry and cookery courses hosted by Ercole and his mother Claudina, and available as a holiday let. It also provides its owners with a retreat of their own.

But neither partner would have taken on this large country house as a single buyer and, given the benefit of foresight, they might not have done it at all.

Bought for £180,000 (£120,000) in 2002, the house itself wasn't expensive, but its transformation into Casa McQueens blew their budget sky-high. "We naively thought that if we spent another £120,000 we'd have a fantastic home," says Kally. In the end, the renovation cost nearly £500,000.

Nonetheless, Ellis and Moroni have got a lot of house for their money – seven bedrooms, three

kitchens, gardens and a pool. And when you split the costs in two, it could be the perfect way of funding a second home. Whether in Italy, France, Cornwall or Dorset, sharing the cost of a property with friends or family sounds like good economic sense, especially at today's prices.

But does it work in practice? How many close relationships would survive a co-operative choice of colour schemes and bed-linen – let

'Nobody has the last say. We have to agree on every detail'

alone decisions about builders or splitting tax and electricity bills.

Judging by the McQueens experience, this journey wouldn't suit everyone. The first hurdle, choosing the location, was easy. Moroni was born in Le Marche; by coincidence, Kally used to holiday in the province as a child. "This part of Italy has

everything you could want," she says. "The food is fantastic, the weather is great, the countryside is beautiful. But more importantly, it meant something to both of us."

It certainly helps if at least one partner is a local. Kally wonders how they would have managed without Ercole's contacts. They didn't, for example, need an estate agent because his family and friends just "put the word out". And although Kally speaks Italian, her partner was better equipped to unravel his native country's red tape and deal with architects and builders.

Both partners, however, had an equal share in the pain of waiting (planning permission for the renovation took a year) and both had to shoulder the worry of spiralling costs.

They discovered, for example, that the foundations had to be reinforced to comply with legal requirements on commercial properties. As the costs rose, there were moments, Kally admits, when they had to ask each

other: "What have we done?"

The property was originally two farm dwellings, with upstairs living space above a vast barn. When Kally and Ercole bought it, the living quarters were basic but habitable, but downstairs was still only fit for animals.

It was a daunting project but, once again, Ellis and Moroni were in complete agreement about how they should proceed. "We both wanted to preserve the nature of the house, its spirit and integrity," says Kally. "We both agreed on a rustic farmhouse style, with simple antique furniture and a few modern comforts."

The whole "labour of love" took nearly three years and, remarkably, Casa McQueens' joint owners agreed on nearly every detail – "Though I'm not keen on that piano," Kally admits, narrowing her eyes at an upright in the corner.

For anyone thinking of making a joint purchase like Kally and Ercole, it is vital to draw up a contract stating exactly who owns the property, says Robin Thomas of Strutt & Parker. "It's important to treat it as a business," he warns.

Experts also advise joint second-home buyers to go for a property which is already modernised – thus avoiding the renovation problems which caused such heartache at Casa McQueens.

So would Kally consider a similar project with friends? "A business partner, yes," she says, "but friends? A recipe for disaster if you chose the wrong people."

Casa McQueens sleeps 15 and costs from £2,450 per week. Flower and cookery courses cost £1,500 per person. Call 020 7251 5505 or visit www.casamcqueens.com.



Flower power Kally and Ercole at Casa McQueens, top, where they run floristry courses or just

For sale in Le Marche



Mountain view A two-bedroom farmhouse near Cingoli, £340,000, Prestige Property (www.prestigeproperty.co.uk)

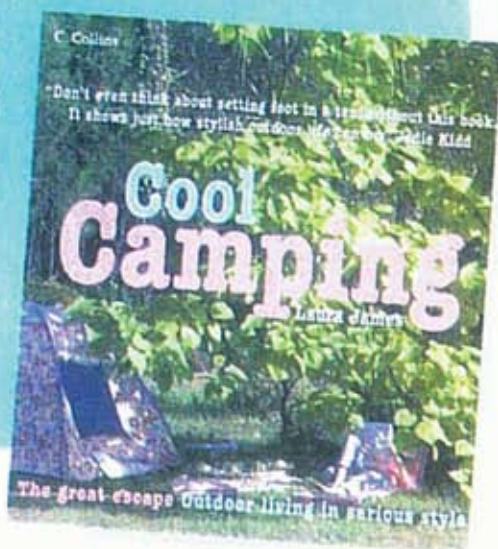


Olive orchard A four-bedroom house near Ascoli Piceno with 1.25 acres, £260,000, Magic Marche (020 8941 8300)



Ripe for renovation Three storeys with garage at Mogliano, £91,800, Prestige Property (www.prestigeproperty.co.uk)

outdoor lifestyle with less effort and more appeal. Whether your lodgings are a yurt, tipi, VW or Cath Kidson tent, this guide will tell you how to do it in style. With comments from Cool Campers such as Jodie Kidd and Alice Temperley, a guide to the most unusual camping sites and music festivals, gorgeous recipes, and the best campsite playlists – this is one for the shopping basket.



La Dolce Vita



Renowned international florists McQueens have opened a luxury lifestyle retreat in the medieval hill-town of Belvedere, in Le Marche, Italy. Casa McQueens is where Ercole Moroni, the creative director of the florists was born and raised; and the former farmhouse has now been lovingly restored to retain most of the original features. Casa McQueens will be holding a

Flower & Cookery Course from 17 June to 24 June where participants will be thought to create authentic Italian dishes by the women of Le Marche preparing recipes which have been handed down from generation to generation using organic produce from the gardens. While Ercole himself will be teaching participants how to make stunning floral arrangements. Other activities include sightseeing, tastings in local wineries and farms, and of course, some obligatory sunning by the infinity pool with a chilled Verdicchio! €1,500 per person includes all meals and excursions. See www.casamcqueens.com for details.