



STAMEN POWER

When Christian Broughton finds himself eating petals for dinner, he knows he's in for a bunch of fun – and a long evening



Florist Ercole Moroni (above, with his business partner Kally Ellis) is relaxed about preparing an extravagant five-course meal for friends (top)

Shall we go up to the library?" Hold on, Professor Plum. This can't be right. Four friends have just arrived for dinner and are getting acquainted or re-acquainted in the front room, when in comes one of tonight's hosts, John Tibble, and invites us to the reading room. But then his tone of voice changes: "I'll bring the champagne." OK, things might be all right after all.

It's not every day you get to nose around in someone's library. For starters, it's not many homes that have a library, but here we are, surrounded by a Farrow & Ball dark green and that musky, cedary smell of, well, books. It feels like a great place to drink bubbly with friends, perched on the arm of the leather sofa or the corner of the antique wooden desk. As in all the other rooms – except one of the two

bathrooms, which has a lime-green *chaise-louange* – the furniture sits comfortably with the original fittings of the four-storey Victorian townhouse. There's something otherworldly about having a room lined with books, a decade in having the space to spare so close to Highbury Corner, north London. Any fustiness is seen off by the bunches of tulips. Speaking of which, where is Ercole?

Ercole Moroni, the other of tonight's hosts, is a leading florist, and so far he's been neither seen nor heard. And that's a rarity for the flamboyant Italian. He's been in the kitchen since everyone arrived, black shirt immaculately pressed, ditto the crisp white apron. He's hard at work, setting a line of single poppies down the centre of the table, preparing the Dover sole on the range cooker, giving orders to his

business partner, Kally Ellis, who's lending a hand. It's an elaborate five-course menu, and everything will be garnished with petals. A lot to bite off? "No, no," he says. "It comes naturally. I cook like this every night. Ask John."

By 11 pm, there are three courses to go, but no one looks hurried – the food's stunning, the wine's flowing. Against John's English reserve, Ercole is larger than life, words coming so fast he's losing track of whether he's speaking English or Italian. The hours of cooking were well worth it, but by the end of the meal, at a little after 2am, it's a long time since we were in the library. A return home to bed is feeling a little overdue. ■

Ercole Moroni will be at the House & Garden Fair, Olympia, tel: 0870 1212 525, from 24 to 27 June

What's on the menu?

Staking points

Who's who Ercole Moroni of McQueens is one of the country's leading florists, and tonight he and his partner John Tibble, who works in student support at City University, have invited four friends. Jean Egbinike, a marketing consultant; Kally Ellis, an ex-banker and Ercole's business partner; Bertrand Pierson, the general manager of Plateau, a Conran restaurant in Canary Wharf; and Sarah Stewart-Smith, an interiors writer.

What's the occasion? "Just because," says Moroni. "Why do you need a reason to cook dinner for such wonderful friends?"

What's cooking? A five-course extravaganza: asparagus with toasted baguette, smoked salmon, rocket, lime, crème fraîche; wild mushroom risotto; lemon sorbet palate cleanser; Dover sole; and British cheeses. And it's all scattered with edible rose, dill and viola petals. Some people, they just can't leave their work at home.

Name that tune John is sitting nearest the CD

player, and he's presiding over what looks suspiciously like a pre-arranged stack of discs: Goldtrapp's *Black Cherry* is his album of the moment. Other than that, the Buddha Bar compilations merge into one another.

And to drink? Plenty of champagne to start, and then a combination of Côtes du Rhône, Viognier with dinner.

Style tips If you're buying flowers for your home, do not try to pack all your favourites into one bouquet. A cluster of just a single type and colour – say, a bunch of red tulips – looks better. If you still want other flowers, buy another single-variety bunch for a separate vase.

What's the gossip

"We have just been doing the flowers for the new *Batman* film"... "Remember New Year at the restaurant? I invited you over for lunch and couldn't get rid of you until the next morning"... "I am really into grasses at the moment – I love the movement." "Do you have a garden?" "And a gardener?"





Opposite far left: the sitting room features Victorian fireplaces, little waist and cane chairs we carefully selected to fit the proportions of the long room. The over the top (left) is Italian-made but Chinese design; it just fits the corner. Top left: gold tumblers double as Grand Prix on the library mantelpiece. Left: a pair of bonbon dishes and an ornate clock take stage on the sideboard. sitting room. Below: Ercole Moroni in London home.

Ercole's golden touch

Ercole Moroni's unique style has made him a floristry superstar, but it's not just flowers he has a flair for, as a peek at his home shows...

Report CAROLINE ATKINS Photographs SIMON BROWN

If you had to conjure up a domestic setting for Ercole Moroni, the flamboyant Italian-born design director of contemporary florists McQueens, you could hardly imagine anywhere less likely than the classic Victorian architecture of his North London terrace, all landings, ceiling roses and cast-iron fireplaces. But Ercole loves challenges and has managed to keep the Victorian essence of the tall, thin, five-bedroom house

he shares with his partner, John, while turning it into a two-bedroom living space full of colour and light. It's a world away from where he grew up – a village in Le Marche 'with more chickens than people' – but it reflects his instinctive sense of how to celebrate the pleasures of everyday life.

It's partly the flowers, of course – McQueens, which Ercole set up in 1991 with business director Kally Ellis, styles projects for such starry events as the Oscars and the ▶



INTERIORS

By CLARE NOLAN





◀ Cannes Film Festival, as well as teaching new devotees at its London school – but it's also to do with the clever use of space.

'I don't like space for the sake of it,' says Ercole. So why have all those bedrooms when you don't need them for sleeping in? Much better to have a first-floor library and separate bathrooms with enough space to relax in. 'Because everyone should have their own bathroom,' he says.

For Ercole, his bathroom and the library are the most important rooms. 'And of course the kitchen. I cook every night – I love real

cooking, the magic that can come from simple ingredients.' (This is the idea behind the latest McQueens project, a 19th-century Le Marche farmhouse that will be rented out for holidays and courses including cooking and floristry.) The kitchen is the room that seems closest to Ercole's Mediterranean roots, with its sunflower walls, yellow ochre and coppery brown tiles, a terracotta floor adjoining the original warm oak boards, and cabinets painted the subtle blue-green of olive leaves.

There are plenty of contrasts because, Ercole says, 'I couldn't

decorate a whole house in one go. I like it when I come across something perfect, and then I buy it.' So the kitchen chairs are a mixture of styles from a shop in Camden, and a cabinet in one alcove mixes delicate Japanese tea cups with bright glazed dishes from Marrakech. But the whole look is brought together by the muted but warm, stone-coloured woodwork that runs throughout the house. 'I planned the colours from the start. That's why the house feels unified, despite the differences from room to room,' says Ercole.

It's these differences that make the house so interesting – from the sunny Mediterranean-style kitchen and the rich reds and greens of the first-floor library, to the main bedroom, where pale colours and contemporary painted furniture are offset by ornate French mirrors and a gracious Victorian fireplace. The

National Trust paint colours Ercole has used are well suited to the age of the building and create stunning backdrops for his vast picture collection. Three colourful Hockney prints on the study landing – fantasy landscapes mixing open fields with suburban villas and Palladian follies – echo Ercole's quirky style. The staircase is lined with sketches of Italian bar scenes ('I couldn't resist them and bought the lot') and a pile of black and white photographs by Mario Giacomelli sits on the library floor just waiting to be hung.

For Ercole, the pictures – like the flowers – need to be worked into the overall design. 'A house without flowers is nothing,' he says, 'but it's essential to get the right scent and colour for the room.' Which means using cool-coloured hyacinths and lily of the valley in the bathroom – to make it look larger as well as smell sweet – and bunches of rosemary in

'You can't afford new furniture every day, but you can have new flowers. The simpler they are, the better, and it's essential to get the right scent and colour for the room'

Home life

BY LARA SARGENT



ERCOLE MORONI'S TIPS ON... USING FLOWERS IN THE HOME

Buy seasonal flowers wherever possible. Berries, autumn leaves and anything orange or yellow would work well around this time of year. I'm particularly fond of garden hydrangeas which make amazing arrangements, last for ages and can be dried in water.

Spoil yourself with scented flowers in bedrooms and bathrooms. White flowers provide some of the most amazing scents – I'd recommend peonies, white hyacinths, sweet peas, tuberose and magnolia.

When you've got your flowers home always put water into a very clean vase. Add a tiny bit of bleach (to kill bacteria) and sugar (to feed them), and then recut your flowers and place the stems immediately into the water. Never submerge leaves in the water as they will rot.

When there are so many beautiful flowers to choose from it's tempting to overdo it. Try not to mix too many different types and/or colours of flower together. Keep it simple – even top florists can get it wrong by being pretentious!

THERE'S A TERRIFIC SENSE OF EXCITEMENT THAT surrounds Ercole Moroni. As one half of the duo behind florist-to-the-stars McQueens he's naturally enthralled with all things floral – from the spear-like, crimson heliconia propped up in his lounge to the lime green spiralling seed heads in the bathroom. But Italian-born Ercole also has an infectious enthusiasm for art, photography, fashion, good food, and, of course, his home.

'My home is influenced by many things, but mainly I want it to be comfortable,' says Ercole, who set up McQueens 12 years ago with fellow florist Kally Ellis. 'I really hate houses where you have to take your shoes off or where you can't touch a wall in case you mark it.'

There's no fear of either in the North London Victorian home that Ercole has shared with his partner John for the past seven years. Here, amid beautiful antiques, bold paintings (mainly by British artist Anne Lynch) and squishy seating, the vibe is friendly and luxuriously laid-back. Colour also plays a big part and each room has been saturated with a Farrow & Ball National Trust hue – inky-blue and deep terracotta in the library, pale buttery gold in the lounge and a restful leaf green in the bathroom.

'I love every colour,' confesses Ercole. 'Although there's one exception – peach. If I had to say a favourite colour, it would have to be green because there are so many different shades.'

The house was an out and out wreck when the couple first set eyes on it, with shocking red carpet, multicoloured striped floorboards and even an air-raid shelter in the garden. But it had all the ingredients to excite Ercole's creative sensibility. 'I liked the size of the house,' he says. 'I loved the fact it had lots of character and as soon as I walked in I thought, "This is it, this is my home".'

Despite such knee-jerk spontaneity, the decoration of the house took an altogether more meticulous approach,

'I really hate houses where you have to take your shoes off or where you can't touch a wall in case you mark it'

rather like the way Ercole tackles his work. 'With flowers I take into consideration every single element – not just the flower itself but the country it comes from, the texture, the time of the year, the occasion and the person,' he explains. 'It's the same with the house. I had to remove every single element before I started putting things back in and I never add anything unless it's meant to be there.'

It's a philosophy that has become a way of life for the energetic Italian and earned him an A-list clientele for his simple but stylish floristry – everyone from Gwyneth Paltrow to the Vanity Fair Oscar Party wants a bit of McQueens' magic.

'I am a real believer in technicality,' says Ercole. 'For instance, I've been cooking since I was 10 but I'm not a chef. If I did want to become a cook I'd train as a chef seriously then start to create my own recipes. Even if you do well as an amateur, sooner or later without technique you'll stumble.'

The house was originally five bedrooms but the pair decided to keep two and convert the others into a library, a dressing room and an extra bathroom.



Above: Ercole likes to change his house with the seasons by adding timely floral arrangements and introducing new soft furnishings.

'I think it's the most civilised thing to have your own bathroom,' says Ercole. 'It's my luxury, it's where I do all my preparation for the day.'

Given Ercole's love of cooking and entertaining, the colour-drenched kitchen is another important room in the house. With a vibrant Mediterranean spirit, it's a mix of bright yellow wall tiles, a huge industrial range cooker and open shelves crammed with a medley of pots and plates from all over the world. The beaten-up wooden refectory table, picked up at Camden Market, is laid with a spectacular berry and sea coral wood display – a nod to the arrival of autumn.

'Like clothes and fashion, I love changing the house with the seasons,' he explains. 'I do this simply by changing the flowers, the cushions or by lighting the fires in the winter.'

The house is now complete, though true to Ercole's non-stop energetic nature, the next project is already planned. The loft is set to be converted into a huge gallery space to display his growing collection of Mario Giacomelli photography.

Not only that, but Ercole is finishing off Casa McQueens, a renovated farmhouse near his native Marche, where groups of 10 can experience a slice of true Italian culture, including wine and olive tasting, flower arranging and cooking from real Italian mamas.

'My mind is constantly working, it's overheated with ideas,' says Ercole with a laugh. 'I have no problem with artist's block, but perhaps now and again I need to relax. It's because I want to do so many things. My journey is just beginning, it's definitely not the end.' ■

+ADDRESS BOOK

McQueens, 126 St John Street, EC1, tel: (020) 7251 5505.
For information on courses call McQueens School on (020) 8510 0123.

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

Home & Living

December 11 2005 property.telegraph.co.uk

Chuck out the tinsel

It's not just bells and holly as **Lesley Gillilan** asks designers and other style-setters how they will be decorating their homes this festive season

ERCOLE MORONI
Contemporary florist, pictured, co-founder of McQueens
Lives: in a Victorian townhouse, off Holloway Road, north London.

Aside from a pile of Venetian glass baubles artfully arranged at the centre of his table, Ercole's decorations are entirely natural. "I'm not a glittery person, and coloured lights and plastic trees are my worst nightmare," he

says. Instead, he draws inspiration from memories of his Italian childhood. "What I remember is all the lovely smells - wood fires, oranges, chestnuts, my mother's cooking. Smell is the most important thing in my house at Christmas."

In every room he places bowls filled with flowers, fruit and spices (snowdrops, red berries, cinnamon sticks, aniseed, pomegranites). "I put Christmas roses in my bedroom,

hyacinths in the bathroom," he says. A few amarillas add dashes of vibrant colour. His Christmas tree (a blue pine) is dressed with simple white lights and dozens - 200 last year - of hyacinth bulbs (from £6.50 for 25 from www.gee-tee.co.uk).

"I wash the soil from the roots and sit them in the tree. They keep on growing and the scent is incredible." Burning orange peel on a fire is another way to create a Christmassy

fragrance. "Every Christmas morning, I light a wood fire in my bathroom, open a bottle of champagne, have the longest bath in the universe and then start cooking. In Italy, food is the number one priority at Christmas."

www.mcqueens.co.uk





Floristry guru Ercole makes a perfect posy



Helen's green fingers at work



Hey presto! A beautiful table display that will be the talk of my next dinner party

More power to my FLOWERS

Can anyone learn to make the humblest leaves and blooms look stylish? Helen Lederer seeks inspiration at London's coolest flower school

We've all been there. Late for Sunday lunch, miles from any shops and in a panic because we've forgotten our floral offering. If I knew then what I know now, I might have been able to grab a bit of stray foliage from the kerb, fashion the flower heads into a jam jar and maybe shove a candle into the mêlée for a stylish yet simple statement. But at the time of crisis, I hadn't studied at McQueens Floristry School for my floral table display awakening.

The man behind the school is Ercole Moroni, a passionate Italian florist who's known he was destined to work with flowers since the tender age of ten. And tender he is. In fact, he's every bit the horse whisperer, as he gently but purposefully coaxes his flowers into the most complicated shapes.

I arrived to find a group of friendly people assembled in a large, light room full of chunky flowers and smelling of gorgeous coffee. Our group was internationally represented. Two very genteel and charming Swedish ladies (bound to be neat), a Japanese girl (bound to be naturally gifted) and an English part-time sculptor (bound to be creative). Never mind,

we had each been given smart notepads and pens, which cheered me up.

I settled down to hear Ercole share his passion about flowers and design. "Don't you worry about being ripped off?" I piped up (thinking about myself, of course, can happen). "It's a compliment," he replied philosophically, "you have to bend." This was said as a cala lily was being skilfully manoeuvred into a fishbowl.

We moved on to some basic ground rules, starting with the one that you can't mix different cultures. So, if you find yourself using exotic blooms, it's best *not* to mix them with European roses, but *if* you're using roses, it's best to mix them with European flat leaves like aspidistra or ivy and not go for the tropical stuff. Ercole explained that the wrong version was like having

spaghetti bolognese with chocolate sauce, marmalade and a cherry on top.

We all nodded, desperate for more tips, so we could rush home and make perfect table displays. I was already compiling a guest list for a dinner party to admire mine. Should I provide food as well? Surely not – it would detract.

Then came a rather precise rule to do with numbers. Never use just one flower as it looks odd. Never use two because you can't get a 3-D effect. Ercole put two flowers in front of his eyes and waggled them like a pair of joke glasses – yes they looked foolish, we agreed. Apparently, you need five flowers to be balanced. You can have six (that's five with one in the middle) or seven (as that's odd) but not eight (don't ask), but never one, two or four, OK?

After that, anything goes, depending on the colours. "Like what?" I asked, frantically trying to keep up with my notes. "If it's orange and blue, it should be more blue, since blue is cooler and balances it out." Of course, I knew that really. Ercole charmingly added that these suggestions were just advice. To him, the right flowers could lift a person's mood (daffs), make a room bigger (white lilies), act as an aphrodisiac (best experienced through his tuberose floral candles. I have – result) and change the world.

Then we were invited to select any vase and flowers unsupervised. This was scary. It was one thing to see him do it and quite another to wrench a bit of aspidistra round a square vase. My leaves and I didn't see eye to eye as they kept springing back maliciously. Then I forgot the rules – I didn't fill the vase with water (first thing you do) and mixed the European roses with exotic lilacs, until it was all a sorry mess.

Thankfully, it proved a useful teaching tool as an example of what not to do. The Swedes were going great guns with their roses, while my Japanese friend had created an architectural triumph. After a babyish request ("You do it then?") to the kind Ercole, my vase with cream roses ended up looking good enough to eat.

We were all given a set of his magic square vases to take home and I made sure those floral candles came with me. But why stop short at flowers? There's a fruit and veg class to try out next. Green fingers? They are now. **w&h**

Visit www.mcqueens.co.uk; shop: (020) 7251 5505; floristry school: (020) 8510 0123.

5 TOP TIPS FOR DIY FLOWER ARRANGING

Before you put the flowers in water, always cut the stems using a sharp pair of scissors – a ragged edge can actually stop water flow.

If you're unsure about mixing different colours, it's best to stick to pastels as these will always work well together.

Try and group smaller flowers together in an arrangement, so that they don't get lost among the bigger blooms.

Cut the stems to about twice the height of your vase, leaving several stems an inch or two longer for the centre of your arrangement.

Semi-woody stem blooms, such as hydrangeas and poppies, exude a sap that kills other flowers. Seal the ends by holding in hot water first.

'They smile, they prickle, they smell. And then they bow...'

This ain't floristry, this is... well, what exactly? **Hermione Eyre** spends a day delivering bouquets to the stars

Florists, especially the celebrity variety, have tongues sharp as secateurs. When I stagger into the outer Hackney flower studio at 5.50 in the morning, several florists look up and chorus "Oh, good afternoon!" waspishly. They've been there since about 3am. The workshop floor is already knee-deep in leaf litter - discarded eucalyptus leaves and beheaded daisies - and several men in tight tops are dashing away with their twine and pliers, bundling up bouquets while jiggling to Madonna. It feels a bit like Father Christmas's elf factory, the floral branch. I can almost see Dudley Moore in the corner grappling with an oversize delphinium.

"Valentine's Day, now that really is like being Santa," says their leader Ercole Moroni. "You got to deliver presents to all the lovers in the world before breakfast!" Ercole is an Italian charmer, known as "Perky Erky" to celebrity chums. He lives up to my wildest florist fantasy, filling the role of flower artiste to the stars to perfection. It's not even dawn yet and he's fretting over his latest pink peony creation. "Where is my motivation? I

need motivation for the vase," then bursting into laughter as he strokes a phallic tuberose.

The first drama of the

The first drama of the day arrives with a cargo of blooms from Amsterdam, ferried in by floral transporters. The Flying Dutchmen. Opening up one of the long cardboard coffers, Ercole moans

with disappointment. "Mio dio, a death!" A group of solicitous florists gathers round him, cooling over the mildewed remains of a 4ft Heliconia. "It is limp, oh, limp as a lettuce," Ercole sighs. "This is my nightmare. You open the box, all dead. This is why I have two sleepless nights before I do the Vanity Fair party for the Oscars. Comprendre?"

I can certainly see that McQueens is a far cry from your local Texaco. The flowers are treated like divas. They only travel at a computer-controlled temperature of 11 degrees ("this way to keep them sleepy") and their welcome water vats must stand for 24 hours so as to be accommodatingly tepid. For the Oscars, the party planners fly over to Hackney to screen the flowers, and the height of each bud is measured to a millimetre. "Flowers, they are performers," twitter Ercole. "They smile, they prickle, they smell. And when their show is over... they bow." Kally Fitz, the business brains behind the company, chimes in: "What, well we do deal in yorshables."

Ercole, while trimming rose stalks, muses on his life. "I am not a florist. I am more like a stylist. Because I choose what is a good fit for the personality. For Juan Collins, she is Madonna, so I take her the white lilies, which are the most like her. For Graham Norton, she would be a poppy because he is

extrovert and bright and a little bit silky. I actually do his flowers for his dinner party and he likes them very much. Kate Moss would be an orchid because she is so slender and such a smiling face. The Queen - she would be a rose, of course, a Victorian garden rose. Very smelly."

But we're interrupted by the first big order of the morning. Alexander McQueen wants to send Kate Moss a bus-poke bouquet. The staff, being used to such things, aren't remotely impressed. In fact, when it turns out he wants to send her 30 red roses clustered round one white rose, they are almost snifty. Just as ephesuses are being raised at this surprising design, one of the florists suggests I've got it. "It could be a symbol thing! That's it, it resonates but little daughter." Believed, all the assembled florists agree enthusiastically. When it comes to matters of taste, the customer is often wrong. Ercole writes to recall how a bride once asked for five goldfish as her table centrepiece. "Yes, this happens to me! How terrible, how cruel! How Miss! I after her very easily not



Heaven scent: 'Perky Erky' Moroni of McQueens, whose finest moments include a man-to-man nosegay - 'red chillis in a square twine lattice. If this does not get him sex, nothing will!' - and a 51-rose bouquet for Kate Moss (below left) from designer Alexander McQueen
ANDY PARADISE, PA

'Graham Norton would be a poppy. Kate Moss - be a poppy. Kate Moss - she would be an orchid. The Queen? A Victorian garden rose, very smelly'

to do this!" He hates carnations ("they remind me of Pizza Express") and he will not countenance bows. "From an early age, I eliminate bows. I strip them off my mother's flowers." He's been insulted by people asking for blue roses and, the worst crime of all, glitter. "I tell them 'Go buy plastic flowers!'"

His finest moments, however, include a man-to-man nosegay - "red chillis in a square twine lattice. If this does not get him sex, nothing will." And recently, a City broker preparing to propose marriage hired Ercole to carpet the penthouse of the Berkeley hotel with petals and candles. "Thank God, she says yes," sighs Ercole. "One man spent £800 a week courting a lady. He pursued her for several years, he spends hundreds of thousands. And she still say 'no'. We think, was it the flowers? Did we let him down?"

It's time to go on a delivery mission, and I pile into the McQueens mini van, which is fragrant and loaded with rushing blooms. We drop them off at City banks and boutiques, meeping into the buildings with our faces hidden behind tall sprays of fresh flowers. Security guards and sternly at our pretty business, while receptionists can see them. The modern banks like DASH get spiky contemporary arrangements - known, in the

flower biz, as "architectural" - while the smaller, more traditional places get "fluffy" posies with sprigs of heather and rosehips.

We leave the buildings carrying away the dead ones - big armfuls of dried up, bleached out has-beens, their water thick and stinking. Soon our van has dead flower halitosis. My driver Kelley - who's warm and chatty and a laugh a minute - tells me how flower corpses all stink in their own special way. "Roses smell like cabbage, arum lilies smell like rotting fish. Artichokes, they bubble up like a bog pond. Orchids go slushy and smell like wee. Who said floristry's lovely, eh?"

Our next stop is one of the mansions off the King's Road. White stucco without, and white and cream within, it has several spool-like sofas visually echoed at mantelpiece level by a number of oversized display books. These are also white - and doubtless white on the inside too. Kelley and I are removing some (white) orchids because they have declined fractionally from a state of crisp perfection, and two uninformed Filipino maids are helping us. "We're only going to throw them away," says Kelly to the maids. "Why don't you take some?" The maids gape and stretch their eyes. "No, we cannot. It would be more than our lives worth if we

lady was to catch us..." (elaborate mime of great terror). "But they would look so nice for our room in Willesden." They eventually furtively bundle them into a bin bag and look very pleased.

Kelley flies to Tribeca every year to fill Robert de Niro's vases. "He likes burnt orange Leonardas roses. Lots of tiaras too. No, what are they called? Candelabras, that's it. There was everyone there, Kirsten Dunst, Ellen Duncarees, Chloë Sevigny looking very bored... But we didn't do the flowers at Cannes this year because of the little bit of the thing going on between the US and France. Which is a shame because last year we did Pacific blue and lilac roses all juxtaposed at different heights. Very tasteful."

I drive back to the shop, where Ercole is having an oasis tantrum. The green spongy stuff is not spongy enough, he fumes. "Who done this?" His staff scatter, their heads bowed. But after this brief hissy fit, he looks up at me and smiles. "You know, I love my job. But sometimes I feel you see a failure even before you start, because nature is so beautiful."

Celebrity Florist is on TV at 10.30pm



BLOOMING: Ercole has an international, star-studded client list
Picture: KENT GAVIN

Celebrity florist Ercole Moroni reveals the secret affairs and passions of his rich and famous client list. By Tamsin Smith

Celebrities who choose to "say it with flowers" can be extremely thankful that their secrets are safe with Ercole Moroni of McQueens, London's trendiest florist shop to the stars. For when it comes to their tangled private lives, his lips are sealed.

"I am like a priest in a confessional," says Ercole, 37, whose international client list includes Graham Norton, Gwyneth Paltrow and Joan Collins. "I've taken an oath never to reveal what my customers get up to. Sending flowers is a personal thing. If I told you some of the secrets I've been party to, I'd be out of business tomorrow."

These are astonishing stories of stars willing to pay thousands of pounds on their secret affairs, trysts and romantic extravaganzas. One famous male, for instance, asked Ercole to send three bouquets – one to his wife, one to his mistress and one to his gay lover.

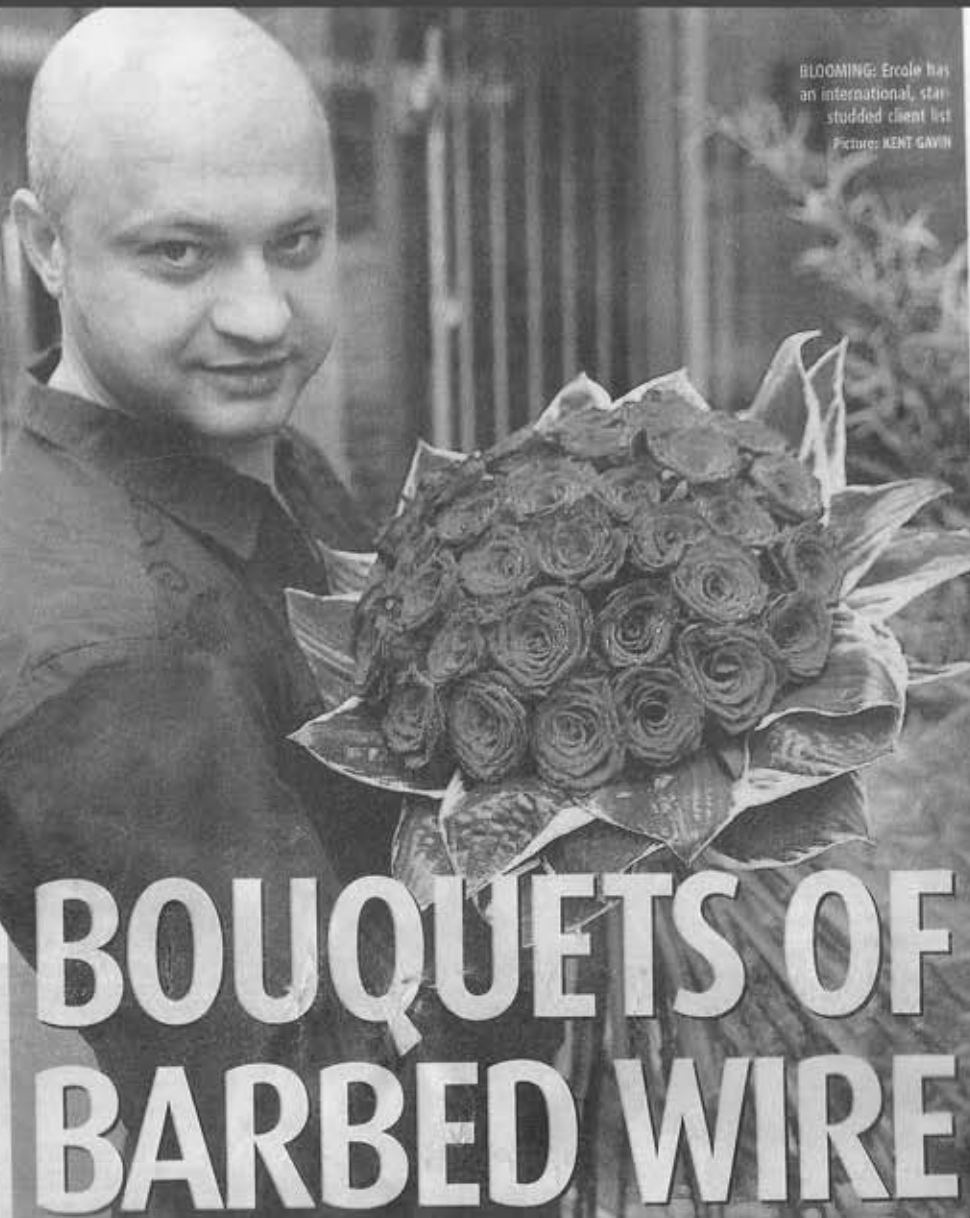
"Of course, the wife's bouquet was the cheapest and his male lover's the most expensive," giggles Ercole, who is the subject of ITV1's *Real Life: Celebrity Florist* on Monday. "It happens all the time. When a famous actress went to hospital after an accident, her husband and her lover both came to me to send her flowers. I had to make sure they didn't arrive at the same time."

His discretion comes at a price. McQueens bouquets start from £50, the average showbiz client spends £400 a time and many will splash out £50,000 for special occasions. Even though Ercole is used to dealing with extravagant tastes, sometimes even he can't believe what he is asked to do. Once a wealthy businessman got him to carpet the rooftop of London's Berkeley Hotel with flowers, to set the scene for him to propose to his girlfriend.

"Thank God she accepted," says Ercole. "I'd never have lived with myself if she hadn't. I nearly died when one man asked his girlfriend on Valentine's day. He bought her fresh flowers every day until her flat was full, but she still dumped him. I was gutted – not just for the poor fellow, but because he was good business for us."

Originally in hotel management, Ercole quit in the '80s to do a course in floristry. He then met his business partner, former bank manager Kally Ellis, 41, and they opened a shop in 1991. News of their stunning designs spread and McQueens, which they co-own, is now the most fashionable florists in the country.

"Everybody loves flowers," says Ercole, an Italian who has lived in London for nearly 20 years. "And ever since it came out how much



BOUQUETS OF BARBED WIRE



CELEBRITY CLIENTS: Gwyneth, Graham Norton and Joan

Elton John spent on flowers, people can't get enough of them. A lot of my celebrity clients feel they are essential to their happiness and well-being, and will pay a lot of money for them."

One of his favourite customers, Graham Norton, loves dramatic ginger lilies, delphiniums and peonies on his dinner table. Whereas Gwyneth Paltrow prefers delicate roses in pastel shades and Joan Collins will only have white flowers in her apartment.

"They all have wonderful taste in their own way," says Ercole. "Graham's a flamboyant character who loves bright colours and extravagant designs, but he never goes over the top. Gwyneth is very feminine, girly and keen on the environment, so she likes seasonal decorations in natural groupings."

Despite what McQueens makes from such well-heeled clients, the shop's biggest money-spinner is providing flowers for showbiz events, such as the Oscars, and

designer shops like Gucci and Hermes. The pinnacle of Ercole's year is the Vanity Fair Oscar party in LA, for which he does all the room and table decorations.

"It takes three weeks to prepare for, but we have such fun," he says. "Me and my team are the first there and the last to leave the party. We do all the topiary, at least 17 table arrangements and the room decorations. I can't possibly tell you how much it costs. I'll leave it for you to guess."

Yet Ercole refuses to compromise his artistic integrity for money. "I can't bear it," he gasps in mock horror.

"One lady wanted us to do the flowers for her wedding, but her awful mother kept trying to take over. She wanted fairy-lights, ivy, white carnations, trellising, the lot. It was very *Dynasty* – naff, naff, naff. In the end I passed her details to another florist. They were much happier and so was I."

● *Real Life: Celebrity Florist*, Monday, ITV1, 10.30pm.

"If I told you some of the secrets I've been party to I'd be out of business"