

Living



Creative juices

Artist Marc Quinn and his wife, the brilliant children's author Georgia Byng, deploy their talent in the service of home cooking. By **Dominic Lutyens**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ROMAS FOOD



It's always fascinating to see whether an artist's work has anything in common with their taste in interiors, and even whether there's any connection between their art and their taste in food. When I first meet Marc Quinn at his north-London home, he's beating eggs in a food processor for a chocolate, ginger and black-grape cake (his own concoction) in a kitchen featuring expanses of pristine white marble in which he designed himself.

According to his wife Georgia Byng (author of the *Ladybird* children's book series) it was more a case of him 'stipulating how the kitchen should look' when they hired an architect. But the use of marble for all the work surfaces in their white-walled kitchen-dining room basement is interesting, because white marble happens to be one of Marc's favourite art materials. It was Quinn who controversially perched his alabaster-white marble sculpture of a pregnant Alison Lapper – born without limbs – on the empty fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square.

'Marble is the best kitchen surface and you don't get that nasty scraping noise'

Of course, to equate an artist's work with the style of their home might seem rather trite. After all, Quinn's statue of Lapper is scarcely equivalent to choosing paint colours or kitchen cabinets. It overturned the usual convention of public sculptures – which idealise heroic, mainly male figures.

All the same, I ask him, in a general sort of way, why he likes white marble so much. His answer is more domestic than artistic. 'It's the best kitchen surface. You can cut on it without damaging it, it cleans easily and when you chop on it, you don't get the nasty scraping noise you get on stainless steel,' he replies, his manner almost as chilled as one

of his other famous pieces – a self-portrait made of frozen blood called *Self*. In fact, so chilled is he that he sometimes comes across as a little disengaged. But perhaps anyone who could create *Self* – a macabre death mask made from 4.5 litres of blood pumped from his body over a period of five months – would have to be.

If Marc's manner can seem cool, his passion for cooking is undeniable. And this is where the relationship between his art, his taste for food and the look of his house becomes even more apparent. Hot colours feature prominently in all three. At home, punctuating all that Arctic white are several examples of *Garden*, Marc's series of ultra-psychedelic

paintings and photographs based on an installation of surreally frozen flowers, vegetables and fruit created for Miuccia Prada's Fondazione Prada gallery, Milan, in 2000. Two large-format examples – picturing hothouse flowers bursting out of the ground like triffids on acid – hang in the kitchen.

Feisty colour is also an important element of the food Marc likes to rustle up: 'I love using red, yellow and orange ingredients.' Lunch today for his family and guests is a richly hued 'cross between paella and a South Indian dish'. 'Marc likes to make strange rice dishes,' teases Georgia. But she admits that 'he is a much better cook than me. I leave the fancy main courses to him. He gets excited about them and can pull them off. I just do the salad things and table settings.' She's being modest: for lunch, she's roasted two chickens with finely-chopped celery and carrot. 'It's a very simple dish in which the juices from the chicken combine with stock to make a delicious gravy. It's a French way of roasting chicken.'

From far left: Quinn's sculpture of Kate Moss; fried chorizo; a Quinn nude; his chocolate cake. Below: Georgia in the dining area with Quinn's *Garden* picture.



As they prepare for their guests, she and Marc make a good team. Georgia, wearing a silver, diamond-encrusted, strawberry-shaped pendant designed by Marc, lines up small clear vases with single stems of orange gerberas and roses on the spotless white dining table. It's a very Quinn colour combo.

As for that ambiguous rice dish, it is, he explains, a combination of 'brown rice with onion, chorizo, garlic, turmeric, cumin, mustard seeds and saffron. After a bit, I switch the heat off and let the pan cool for a while, so the food doesn't overcook and the ingredients can marinate. Just before serving, I'll heat the pan, take out the old bits of chorizo and replace them with fresh slices.'

Marc, who read history and history of art at Cambridge, defends his taste for mixing Spanish and Indian ingredients by arguing that 'all food is hybridised by its very nature. Spaghetti comes from China and Spanish food gets its strong flavours because the country was under Moorish rule for 700 years.' On a recent trip to Kerala, he and Georgia learnt how to make the Indian bread paratha (it's made of wholewheat flour and ghee, and often stuffed with vegetables like cauliflower or potatoes and the Indian cheese, paneer) and coconut milk is another addition to his spicy paella. 'The coconut milk shifts the cultural resonance of the



The Quinn children Lucas and Sky. Below: Georgia's roast chickens.



'Marc is a much better cook than I am. I do table settings'

food – in this case, gives it some Far Eastern flavour,' he explains.

Global though their taste in food is, it soon becomes obvious that he and Georgia are great Hispanophiles. It's not just Marc's twist on paella that gives the game away: for lunch, the starter is paper-thin, ragged-edged jamon serrano. 'It's the pata negra [black-hoof] kind made by feeding the pigs with acorns,' he tells me, adding that he loves Spain partly because the person he most closely collaborates with for his art projects has a studio in Madrid.

He and Georgia are also big fans of the London eatery Moro and Spain's most famous restaurant, El Bulli. In fact the entire Iberian peninsula seems to exert a pull. 'I'm having



a show in January at White Cube's Mason's Yard gallery [in London] which will include 12 sculptures made out of a pink marble you can only find in Portugal.'

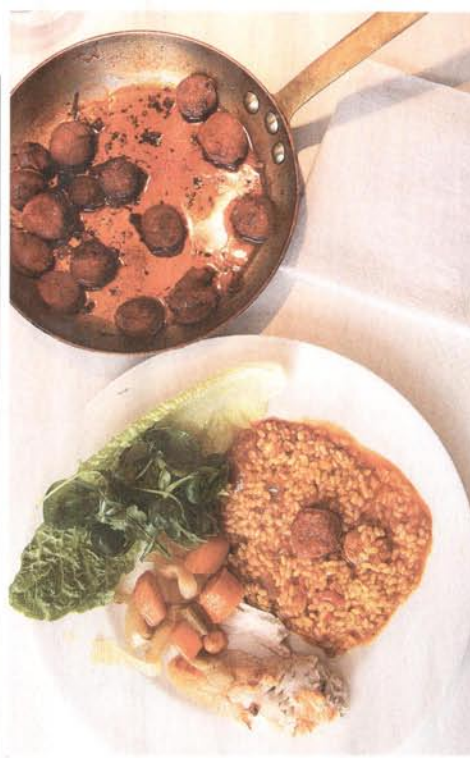
Artists often say cooking is like painting – or art in general. Does Marc agree? 'Well, it is creative. And relaxing. But there's a difference. Unlike art, cooking doesn't have to mean anything.' And he betrays a rebellious streak: 'I don't like to stick to recipes or feel intimidated by them. No one should have to conform to exact measurements – 225g, say, of this or that. It only matters if you're writing cookbooks.'

Before lunch Georgia takes me into her dinky office adjoining the vast ground-floor living room to talk about her books. Before the *Molly Moon* series, she drew comic strips. The first was about the cartoony antics of different types of food in a fridge; another featured sock-eating monsters. Then she invented her teenage hypnotist heroine Molly Moon, 'the world's most miserable orphan, living in a most miserable orphanage' who compensates by acquiring, in each book, a new, thrillingly empowering superhuman skill, from mind-reading to time-travelling. The *Molly Moon* series has proved phenomenally successful. 'They're translated into 36 languages, including Chinese,' says Georgia. In fact, the books are proliferating at such a

'I don't like to stick to recipes. No one should conform'

rate that they're skidding out of her control. 'You never know what covers the foreign-language editions will have. It's quite worrying,' she jokes, showing me one picturing Molly dressed as a saucy sorceress in the sort of get-up Britney might wear for Halloween.

The guests for lunch with Marc, Georgia and their two young sons Lucas and Sky prove to be a boho mix of art and fashion. There's Gawain Rainey, producer of fashion shoots and shows including Burberry, his partner, model Jasmine Guinness (co-owner of Notting Hill toy shop Honey Jam) and their sons Otis and Elwood. Film-maker Gerald Fox (who made a documentary about Quinn for the *South Bank Show* in 2000 and



LUNCH AT THE QUINNS CHICKEN AND RICE

Georgia Byng's roast chicken

SERVES 8

This makes a really moist chicken and then also means there is excellent ready-made gravy. Very simple and the best way of making chicken I think.

2 chickens, approx 1 kilo each
225g carrots, finely chopped
125g celery, finely chopped
8 garlic cloves
750ml chicken stock

Preheat oven to 220°C. Put the chickens in a deep dish. Crush the garlic cloves and rub over the birds. Surround with the carrots and celery and pour over the stock. Cover the dish with silver foil and cook for an hour and a quarter, or until the chickens are completely cooked through. For the last 15 minutes remove the foil in order to crisp the skin. To make the gravy, drain liquid from dish, skim off any fat and either thicken with a little flour if required, or simply serve in a jug.

Marc Quinn's rice and chorizo (above)

SERVES 8

2 large onions
4 chopped garlic cloves
2 small chillis
large knob of ginger peeled and finely chopped
1 tsp turmeric
1 tsp mustard seed, ground
1 tsp coriander seed, ground
500g chopped chorizo sausage
500g wholegrain brown rice
1 litre chicken stock
1 tin chopped tomatoes
1 tin coconut milk
5 saffron strands
cooking oil

Heat 2 tbs oil in a large frying or paella pan and gently cook onions, garlic, chillis, ginger, turmeric, mustard seed, coriander seed and half the chopped chorizo. Add rice, stock, tomatoes, coconut milk, saffron. Cook for at least 40 minutes, adding more stock if necessary. Fry remaining chorizo in a pan. Remove chorizo from rice and replace with the fresh.

is about to exhibit a multi-screen film, *Living London*, at the north London gallery 176), turns up with his partner Josie (who works for a film-funding company) and their daughter, Frankie. Also round the table are Byng's teenage daughter Tiger (by her first husband, the artist Daniel Chadwick) and Tiger's friend Lily.

Lunch is mellow and kid-friendly. Forget the laddish escapades of the YBA crowd, of which Marc was once a key member: there are more bottles of San Pellegrino water on the table than wine (a light rosé). After helpings of paella, chicken and green salad comes the chocolate cake. At first resembling, none too promisingly, a crusty school-dinner sponge, it turns out to have a sumptuously gooey centre. Sky and Lucas, meanwhile, are invited to sample Molly Moon's favourite grub, bread spread with ketchup, and her favourite drink, concentrated orange squash.

After lunch, when the children have been rounded up and the guests have gone home, I'm shown Marc and Georgia's art collection in the hallway and living room. It includes a sculpture of an inflatable safety jacket lined with cigarettes by Sarah Lucas, a Tracey Emin etching, a Pop Art painting of a packet of the pain-reliever Solpadeine by Jason Shulman and a work from Gary Hume's recent series of cartwheeling American cheerleaders. I can't spot any pieces here by arch-YBA Damien Hirst, but I suggest to Quinn that he shares with Hirst an obsession with delaying decay – the difference being that while Marc has frozen nature, Hirst has pickled it. Quinn eyes me a little warily before replying: 'Yes, in the sense that we're both concerned with art's classic themes of life and death.'

Also on display are several pieces by Marc. There's a snow-white marble sculpture of a male amputee, his statue of Kate Moss striking an impossibly contorted yoga pose and an airbrushed *Garden* painting brimming with Disney-bright hothouse blooms. The collection, with two of Hume's high-gloss cassaves, is an indicator of the couple's taste for bold modernity. 'Gary's work is so vibrant, it feels very current,' says Georgia. 'I love all things new and contemporary. I just couldn't live in a house filled with 19th-century paintings. They'd make me feel half-dead.' **OFM** Molly Moon, *Micky Minus and the Mind Machine*, by Georgia Byng, is out now (*Macmillan*, £9.99). Marc Quinn's show at *White Cube*, 25-26 Mason's Yard, London SW1, runs from 23 Jan – 23 Feb 2008 (www.whitecube.com).