

# Annabel Langbein Free range in the City

There's no reining in unstoppable food entrepreneur Annabel Langbein. The accomplished cook, author, sustainability crusader, TV presenter and producer has perfected her recipe for success - and the world is taking notice, writes **Suzanne McFadden**.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SALLY TAGG** STYLING BY **SARAH LYNCH**  
FOOD & PROP STYLING BY **RACHEL GIRDLER**

**A**NNABEL LANGBEIN is all atwitter. She's received a tweet from friends that the overnight snowfall has turned her cabin

overlooking Lake Wanaka into a Nordic postcard. She wishes she was there to see the winter wonderland, and has asked them to send her a photo.

Little more than 10 minutes later, Annabel looks out into the sprawling garden of her Auckland home and shrieks with joy: "Snow!"

Sure enough, the implausible has happened; the magical white stuff is falling in the central city for the first time in more than 70 years.

She tweets back: *Unbelievable - it's SNOWING in Auckland right now!*

We dash outside and put our arms out to let the flakes settle. They've melted before they touch the ground.

It's only fitting that we leave the flurry ►

Annabel's TV show *The Free Range Cook* is being embraced around the globe, including France - which, for this triumphant foodie, is the icing on the cake.



“What makes a good life? I think the answer is having friendships, community and time around the table; I’m trying to give people a road map so they can access that.”

ANNABEL WEARS JAMES PERSE SHIRT FROM MUSE, COUNTRY ROAD SINGLET, PANDORA NECKLACE, BARBED WIRE CO.NZ BELT AND HER OWN JEANS, BRACELET AND RINGS. PREVIOUS PAGE: ANDREA MOORE SHIRT, COUNTRY ROAD SINGLET, PANDORA NECKLACE AND SHELLSHOCK BRACELETS.

to go back indoors and devour some trademark Annabel baking. Sitting pretty on one of the vintage china plates she collects by the hundreds is her latest creation: chocolate cupcakes with pink icing. They are the “27th incarnation” of a recipe she’s been striving to perfect, and right now – with the snow, the rich chocolate and the log fire blazing – this must be near perfection.

These cupcakes promise to be one of the stars of the next cookbook she’s been writing throughout the winter. It’s the sequel to her record-smashing *The Free Range Cook*, the best-selling book in New Zealand last year, now in a remarkable seventh print run.

**L**IFE SEEMS NEAR chocolate cupcake perfection for Annabel and her husband, Ted Hewetson, as they continue to build on the triumph of the cookbook and its sister television series of the same name, which has now been sold to 79 markets. As the global brand gets bigger, Annabel’s mantra – world domination by spatula – gets louder.

But they haven’t let that success change their lives conspicuously. They still muck about in gumboots and jeans, eat in most nights and light the candles on the dining room table for every meal.

Even after writing and testing recipes all day – at least 200 for her latest book – Annabel still finds herself drawn back to the kitchen to cook alongside Ted in the evenings. “We share the kitchen, and cook together most nights,” says Ted, apparently an admirable cook in his own right, excelling in crispy pork belly.

But, he protests: “I get all the dumb jobs! I would quite like some more exciting jobs.” Annabel begs to differ: “You’ve been on gravy-making lately, which is quite a step up.”

A second TV series, to be hosted and co-produced once again by Annabel, will start filming this spring (but she’s not giving anything away about the content). The “performing flea” in Annabel is overjoyed.

Before the series goes to air, her latest culinary bible will hit the shelves. It’s called *Free Range In the City*, and she

will launch it on October 19 at the opening of the Taste of New Zealand Festival in Auckland, for which she has been chosen as the “face”. Like her last book, it’s not just a collection of themed recipes. It represents an ethos, a way of life, that Annabel and Ted try to live by when they’re in their rambling, warm Auckland home.

“A lot of people expect that I live in the country,” Annabel says. “But we’ve been here in the city for the last 23 years, bringing up our two kids and building a business. We spend every second week at our cabin in Wanaka now, and we share some of the values we have there with the way we live in the city.

“We’re all under a lot of pressure in our busy lives today. So I thought, ‘What makes a good life?’ And I think the answer is having friendships, community and time around the table; so I’m trying to give people a road map so they can access that.”

Now that their children are older, it’s easier for Annabel and Ted to split their lives between the two main islands. Son Sean is now 19 and in Melbourne studying science at Trinity College; Rose, 17, is in her last year at King’s College, where she is a boarder. She’s keen to join her brother across the Tasman next year.

The nine hectares the couple bought on the edge of Lake Wanaka 15 years ago is always calling. They have to tend to the fruits of their labour – the sumptuous vege garden built on the terraces behind their now world-famous rustic cabin.

The garden has been regenerated since the 13 episodes were filmed there, thanks to wild goats who staged a cunning raid and ate the lot. Ted has since built stone walls with local schist and raised beds that have so far foiled the goats ... and the rabbits ... and the punishing nor-westerners.

Last November, the couple planted 57 packets of seeds – from aubergine to borlotti beans, capsicum and corn – and now it overflows with produce they have to give away to neighbours and friends.

“When we arrive in Wanaka, the first thing I do is go up to the garden and pick our dinner. Everything comes off the land – I have apples and potatoes in store, and there will be meat off the

farm. It’s almost subsistence living,” says Annabel. “I have a pantry of flavours there, too, but you’re cooking far more with the seasons.”

Back in Auckland, where the couple run their business in an office attached to the house, Annabel admits that it’s a lot easier to “just open the fridge” come dinner time.

“So I was thinking, ‘How can people in the city get good fresh food and cook it really quickly and easily?’ And I realised you can be ‘free range’ in the city,” she says. “We’re so lucky in New Zealand because we have the opportunity to connect with so many cultures in our cities. We have the world’s pantry at our fingertips. Then you add all these fresh ingredients from the farmers’ markets or from the garden in your backyard, or even the herbs on your windowsill, and it’s easy to cook good food really quickly.

“If you have pomegranate molasses, reduced balsamic or chilli sauce in your pantry, you can take something simple, like a piece of chicken, mussels or pasta, and make a really interesting meal that doesn’t have to take a lot of time.”

The farmers’ markets serve a double purpose, as a source of good food and creating a sense of community in the city.

Annabel and Ted walk to the Parnell market on Saturday mornings. Annabel was fortunate enough to encounter that community spirit from the day they moved into their 1920s bungalow 23 years ago. “When we came here, this house was such a dump. It was the middle of winter and so cold – no gib on the walls, no doors and a hole where the bath was,” she recalls.

“Ted and I stood, forlornly saying, ‘Oh my God, have we made the worst decision of our lives?’ And then there was a knock at the door and a lovely smiley face with a bottle of Champagne saying, ‘Welcome to the neighbourhood!’ And we knew everything would be all right.” Annabel is still good friends with Emerald, the convivial neighbour.

“We’ll never move from this house; this is home. People come here to test recipes, and they bring their dogs, and their kids, who rush out to the garden and pick strawberries. I feel very lucky.”

Today, she’s picked spinach, bok choy

and broccoli from the imposing garden in her Auckland backyard. She also took a large pumpkin, cut it into wedges, drizzled over maple syrup and roasted it to be mixed into the couple's meals for the rest of the week.

"When you're time-poor, it's all about what you can do ahead of time, what you can do in bulk, what you can prepare ahead," she explains. "You can freeze those chocolate cupcakes, even with the icing on.

"You want to have fun, live well and not feel that you've sacrificed your life and your digestive system to an industrial food chain." And out pops Annabel the earth mother and board member of the Sustainability Council of New Zealand.

**A**NNABEL DESCRIBES herself as her own best audience: "I'm a busy working mum always looking for expeditious solutions that mean having more fun around the table, and not fretting in the kitchen about whether I've botched the risotto," she says.

But surely, this charismatic down-to-earth cuisine queen wouldn't make a hash of it, like us gastronomy novices?

"I've botched a few things, but thankfully not lately," she laughs. "I've been doing so much cooking lately that I'm in the zone. You get your hand in and you can just as easily lose confidence if you're not cooking often."

She doesn't do so much baking these days, leaving it to Rose and her friends. "If I bake then I eat it all and get fat," she says. "I'm lucky I don't have a sweet tooth or I would be the Michelin Lady."

So after self-publishing 17 books now, many of which have become Kiwi non-fiction classics, how does Annabel whip up an entire digest of recipes she has never revealed before? Not a problem, she says. In fact, sometimes she dreams up too many.

"I sometimes think, 'Oh my gosh, I need to save that one for another project.' And the people in the office say, 'No, because you'll have a whole lot more.' Last week, I literally created 11 new ideas in a day, and they're all really

good. You get a palate memory. We've all got it. Before you cook something, you should taste it in its essence, then that memory is locked away. Once you have that taste you can say, 'Mmm, it could go great with lemon, or with cumin or sage.' So you understand flavour.

"This year, I went to Turkey and I learned a whole lot about their culture and their flavours, and I just carry those memories around in my head."

She's always learning, too. The latest "trick" she learned was putting onion in the bottom of the pan with any roast meat – as it caramelises, it enriches the gravy.

But she also has a headstart on most of us: cooking, she's figured out, is part of her DNA.

"Someone might be an artist painting on canvas, or a potter, but cooking is inherently part of who I am. When I start cooking I feel it, which is lucky."

Another skill innate in Annabel is performing. A natural in front of the television camera, she loves showing people how to cook.

"Television is a great way to teach people; you can distill something that might take you three paragraphs to write, that someone might be scratching their head over," she says.

"I've now worked out that I have a performing flea in me, as my mother always said. I love it, and I can't wait to start production on the new series."

Audiences around the globe obviously love it too. *The Free Range Cook* is currently screening in Brazil, and Annabel has also been getting congratulatory tweets from the country where she got her first culinary break making croissants.

"The series has already had one run in France, and they were really excited about it. Goodness me, if I can take cooking to the French, that's really exciting," she says. Her next challenge is to get the show on American television.

Annabel never imagined how passionately the *Free Range* philosophy would be embraced around the world. "I knew when we were making it that it felt very special. I think it's because it shows what New Zealanders are – naturally hospitable, adventurous and enjoying a lifestyle the rest of the world

envis. Yes, this is us," she says.

"The world we live in now with new media is so fascinating; it's constantly changing with all these new platforms and technologies."

With that, she checks her mobile phone and there's another tweet from Wanaka: *We have your crispy pork belly in the oven for lunch... Yum!*

"Isn't that hilarious? Tweeting is so much fun," Annabel says.

But the success of the *Free Range Cook* book has also proved that a time-honoured form of media is still alive and kicking. There are around 150,000 copies of the book in circulation in New Zealand, and it has sold beyond expectations in Australia and England. There was a minor national crisis late last year when it sold out here just before Christmas.

In July, she collected the New Zealand Booksellers' Choice Award 2011 for *The Free Range Cook* – voted by booksellers as the book they most enjoyed selling. Annabel Langbein Media was also nominated for publisher of the year, a salute Annabel is equally proud of.

"Do you know what was most exciting about it?" she says. "Publishing has been in the doldrums for years. One of the other publishers got up at the awards dinner at Te Papa and said, 'You know, we were all gnashing our teeth last year when you kept selling book after book after book, but everyone said publishing was dead and you've proven that it's not.'"

She's proud of the company that she and Ted, a former farmer and investor, have built together. "I feel incredibly lucky because I married someone who shares this with me. I wouldn't want to do it without him," Annabel says.

"He's a great business thinker, good at managing people and teams. If you give me a balance statement, my eyes glaze over and I want to look the other way, whereas Ted is really astute about those things. And he's really fun.

"With the kids being older, it's been the right time to do it. And we have their support too. Ted and I are really interested to have a big bat now, and see what's out there in the world. We're still young and we've got energy. And in some ways, this is just the beginning." ■ ➤

## 10 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT ANNABEL

**1** She hates eating snails, but loves eating brains.

**2** Although she loves fishing, she gets horribly seasick. "I only go fishing on calm weather days," she says. She also suffers motion sickness in cars and planes. "In fact, when the kids were little, they used to ask, 'Why do you spend so much time with your head in that white paper bag, Mummy?'"

**3** She bought her house in Auckland with money she earned in her teens and early twenties from possum trapping and jumping out of helicopters to recover live deer.

**4** She can't function without light. "I need light. I can't work without it; we light candles every night. I discovered it when we built the cabin in Wanaka, and it was dark. I was like, 'Oh my God, give me light!'"

**5** After surviving a broken back falling from a horse, and seafood poisoning in Peru, she "nearly killed" herself eating a bean in her Wanaka garden. The pretty pink speckled borlotti bean is toxic when eaten raw, as Annabel discovered after munching on them straight off the vine.

**6** She has an obsession with collecting china. "In my previous life, I must have been a china shop." She brings back pieces from her world travels, and says, "It's not illegal to leave a country with six dinner plates under your arms." She also has a healthy addiction to shoes.

**7** She has "can't-leave-the-house bad hair days". She has slightly curly, often unruly hair. "You wouldn't recognise me when I have one of those days. I either stay home or ring my hairdresser and say, 'How soon can I get there?'"

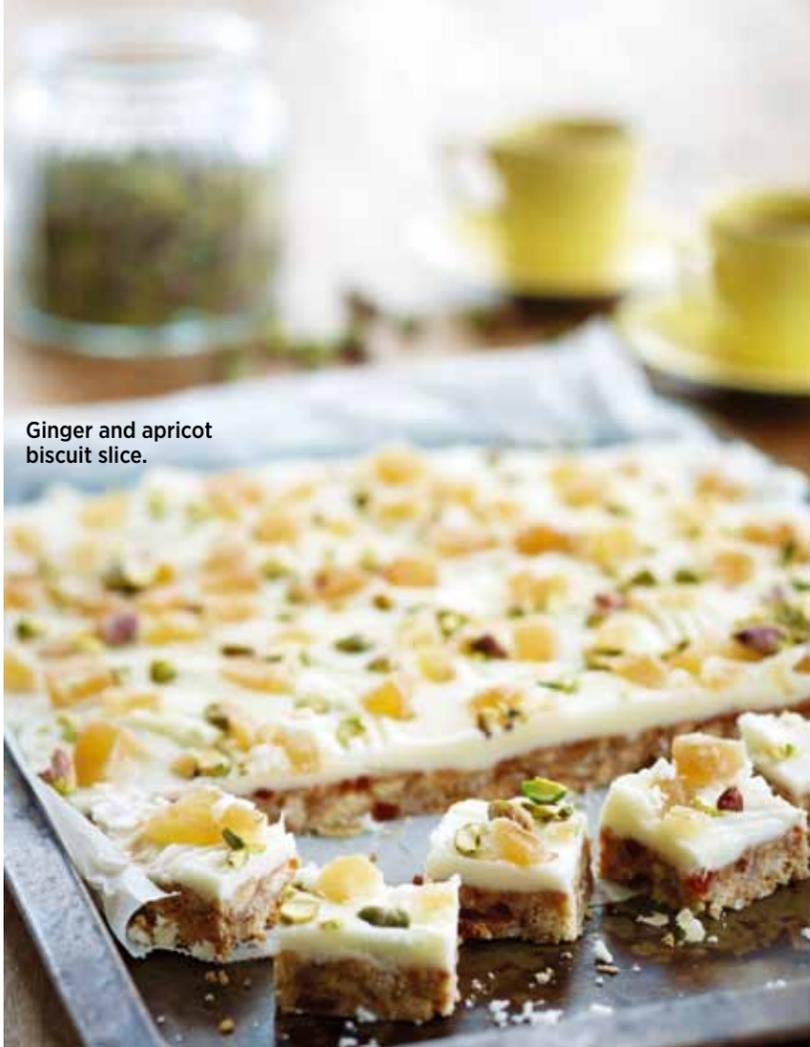
**8** She gets "really ratty" when things don't go into the compost bin that could. "The trick with compost is to make it like you're making a cake. You need thin layers or else it goes sour."

**9** If she could have a different career, it would be as a film-maker. "And I always admire people who write," Annabel adds. "I imagine being a fiction writer would be a cool thing, too."

**10** She has an abhorrence of non-stick cookware. "Where does the Teflon go? I'm trying to take plastic out of my life. It's all going to come back and bite us on the bum one day. Did you know it takes a million years for a polystyrene cup to break down?"



Cheesy rocket scones for beginner bakers. For recipe, see overleaf.



Ginger and apricot biscuit slice.

### Ginger and apricot biscuit slice

MAKES 30 PIECES  
PREP TIME 20 MINUTES + SETTING TIME

The ginger gives this easy, no-cook slice bite, but if you prefer, you could use cinnamon or mixed spice instead. You can also replace the apricots with figs or raisins and the pistachios with walnuts or almonds. It's such a snap to make and great for picnics, school fairs and lunchboxes.

**100g butter**  
**¾ cup sweetened condensed milk**  
**1 cup dried apricots, finely chopped**  
**½ cup crystallised ginger, finely chopped**  
**1 cup desiccated coconut**  
**1 tsp ground ginger**  
**2 Tbsp lemon juice**  
**375g plain sweet biscuits, crushed to fine crumbs**

#### EASY LEMON ICING

**50g butter**  
**3 Tbsp boiling water**  
**1 tsp lemon juice**  
**¾ cups icing sugar**

#### TO GARNISH

**¼ cup crystallised ginger, chopped**  
**2 Tbsp pistachios, chopped**

- 1 Line a 30cm x 24cm sponge roll tray or baking tin with baking paper. To make the base, place butter and condensed milk in a pot and heat gently until butter melts. Remove from heat.
- 2 In a separate bowl, mix together apricots, crystallised ginger, coconut, ground ginger and lemon juice, then add crushed biscuits and stir to combine. Add butter and condensed milk mixture, stirring until well combined. Press into prepared tin and refrigerate until set (about 1 hour) before icing.
- 3 To make the easy lemon icing, melt butter and mix to a smooth consistency with boiling water, lemon juice and icing sugar. Spread over base and sprinkle with chopped crystallised ginger and chopped pistachios. When icing is set, cut into slices or squares and store in an airtight container in a cool place.

### Cheesy rocket scones for beginner bakers

MAKES 12-16 PREP TIME 10 MINUTES  
COOK TIME 15-18 MINUTES

This ultra-simple recipe uses fizzy soda and cream to achieve a light-as-air result. Swap the rocket for parsley or spinach if you prefer. For sweet orange scones, use lemonade in place of the soda, and ½ cup of sultanas or chopped dates, the finely grated zest of 1 orange and ¼ cup of sugar instead of the rocket, cheese and cayenne.

**4 cups self-raising flour, plus extra for dusting**

**1½ tsp baking powder**  
**1 tsp salt**  
**pinch of cayenne pepper (optional)**  
**3 handfuls (75g) rocket leaves, finely chopped**  
**200g tasty cheese, grated**  
**1 cup chilled cream**  
**1 cup chilled soda water**  
**TO SERVE**  
**a little butter (optional)**

- 1 Preheat oven to 200°C and line a baking tray with baking paper. In a mixing bowl, combine flour, baking powder, salt and cayenne pepper (if using). Mix in chopped rocket and cheese.
- 2 In a separate bowl or jug, combine the cream and soda water. Make a well in the centre of the dry ingredients and pour in the liquid. Mix with a knife until just combined.
- 3 If making in a food processor or electric mixer, pulse together flour, baking powder, salt, cayenne, rocket and cheese to combine. Add soda and cream, pulsing 3-4 times until mixture just starts to come together.
- 4 Turn out on to a lightly floured surface and pat into a rough rectangle about 4cm thick. Cut into 12-16 pieces and place on prepared baking tray. Bake until scones are puffed and golden and they bounce back when pressed (about 15-18 minutes).
- 5 Freeze if not using the same day. When ready to use, thaw and reheat for 5 minutes in an oven preheated to 220°C.
- 6 Serve warm or at room temperature, split open and spread with a little butter, if desired. If you have any left over the next day, they are also good split in half, toasted, spread with butter and topped with sliced tomato and a little salt and pepper.



Spiced fruit loaf.

### Spiced fruit loaf

MAKES 1 LOAF PREP TIME 10 MINUTES + COOLING  
COOK TIME 1 HOUR

The recipe for this dense fruit loaf originally belonged to my nan, who used to bake it in her coal range. It's one of those recipes that seems to improve after a day or two – a bit like gingerbread. It's lovely sliced and buttered and enjoyed with a cup of tea.

**1 cup sugar**  
**50g butter**  
**1 cup sultanas**  
**1 cup dates**  
**1 Tbsp golden syrup**  
**1¼ cups water**  
**1 tsp mixed spice**  
**1 tsp ground ginger**  
**½ cup walnuts, chopped**  
**½ tsp vanilla extract**  
**¼ tsp salt**  
**2 cups flour**  
**1 tsp baking soda**  
**1 tsp baking powder**

- 1 Preheat oven to 170°C. Grease a 23cm x 14cm loaf tin and line with baking paper.
- 2 Place sugar, butter, sultanas, dates, golden syrup and water in a large pot. Bring to boil and simmer for 5 minutes. Remove from heat and leave to cool for 10 minutes.
- 3 Stir mixed spice, ginger, walnuts, vanilla extract and salt into the date mixture. Add flour, baking soda and baking powder and mix to combine. Pour into prepared loaf tin and bake 1 hour or until a skewer inserted in the centre comes out clean. Leave to cool in tin for 15 minutes before turning out on to a wire rack.

FOOD STYLING BY ANNABEL LANGBEIN. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANJA WACHSMUTH.



Smoked chicken and mustard pie.

### Smoked chicken & mustard pie

MAKES 4-6 PREP TIME 10 MINUTES  
COOK TIME 20-25 MINUTES

**2 sheets flaky pastry  
a little flour, for rolling  
400g shredded smoked chicken  
250g sour cream  
finely grated zest of ½ a lemon  
1 tsp lemon juice  
2 Tbsp wholegrain mustard  
2 Tbsp chopped parsley  
salt and pepper, to taste  
1 egg, lightly beaten**

**1** Preheat oven to 200°C and place a baking tray in the oven to heat. Place 1 sheet of flaky pastry on a piece of baking paper, dust with a little flour and roll out until you can cut it into a circle 24cm in diameter (use a cake tin or plate as a guide).

**2** In a bowl, combine shredded smoked chicken, sour cream, lemon zest and juice, mustard, parsley, salt and pepper to taste. Spread over pastry, leaving a 2cm border. Brush border with a little lightly beaten egg.

**3** Roll out a second sheet of flaky pastry a little larger than the first, until you can cut

it into a circle 25cm in diameter (to allow for the height of the filling). Place over filling and press down edges with a fork to seal. Brush top with beaten egg and pierce in 2-3 places with a sharp knife. Slide baking paper and pie on to hot oven tray and bake for 20-25 minutes until golden. Serve warm or at room temperature.

### One-pot chocolate & raspberry cupcakes

MAKES 24 PREP TIME 25 MINUTES + STANDING  
COOK TIME 20 MINUTES

If I'm going to make cupcakes I like to make a lot, so this is a double recipe. Not only do the iced cupcakes freeze well, but the raw batter and icing both keep in the fridge for up to a week so you can cook a fresh batch every morning.

**120g butter, in small cubes  
½ cup neutral oil  
1 cup water  
100g dark chocolate, chopped  
½ cup cocoa, sifted  
1½ cups caster sugar  
2 eggs**

**1 tsp vanilla extract  
1½ tsp baking powder  
1 tsp baking soda  
1 cup yoghurt or buttermilk  
2 cups flour  
¾ cup raspberries  
'IN THE PINK' FROSTING  
120g butter  
200g cream cheese  
2 Tbsp blackcurrant cordial  
1 tsp vanilla extract  
5-6 drops red food colouring  
5 cups icing sugar, sifted  
candy sprinkles**

**1** Preheat oven to 180°C. Line 24 muffin pans with paper cases. Place butter, oil, water and chocolate in a medium-large pot and melt over medium heat. Turn off heat and whisk in cocoa and caster sugar, making sure there are no lumps of cocoa. Whisk in eggs and vanilla.

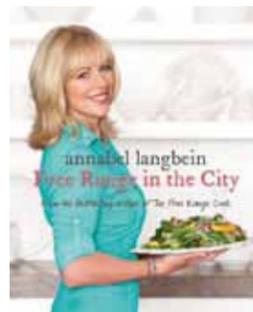
**2** Mix baking powder and baking soda into yoghurt or buttermilk then add to chocolate mixture with flour, whisking until evenly combined to a smooth batter. Stand for at least 10 minutes before cooking.

**3** Spoon mixture into paper cases, using about 3 Tbsp per cupcake to ¾ fill each case. Push 2-3 raspberries into each (if berries are frozen, stand cupcakes a further 10 minutes before cooking).

**4** Bake cupcakes until they are risen and the tops bounce back when gently pressed (about 20 minutes). Stand 5 minutes before lifting out of tins. Ice when cold.

**5** To make In The Pink Frosting, bring butter and cream cheese to room temperature, then beat together with blackcurrant cordial, vanilla and colouring until creamy smooth. Add icing sugar and beat until smooth. Chill for 10 minutes. At this point the mixture should hold its texture when you spoon it. If it is too thin, add a little more icing sugar. Put into a piping bag and pipe on to cooled cupcakes. Garnish with candy sprinkles.

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For more  
information, see  
[www.annabel-  
langbein.com](http://www.annabel-langbein.com).



FOOD STYLING BY ANNABEL LANGBEIN. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANJIA WACHSMUTH.



### ONE-POT CHOCOLATE & RASPBERRY CUPCAKES

If you want to change this recipe to look like the cupcakes on the cover, just leave the blackcurrant cordial and red food colouring out of the icing and put 2 Tbsp of cold water in instead.

One-pot chocolate and raspberry cupcakes.