



# RECIPE FOR global success

*In New Zealand she's adored as the free range cook, now Annabel Langbein is on the verge of international stardom.*

*Jane Binsley learns her secret to career sustainability*

PHOTOGRAPHS EMMA BASS

**A**nnabel Langbein is AWOL. She popped out to buy paua for a recipe shoot and got snarled in the central Auckland rush-hour traffic.

I'm given a glass of wine and left to roam her spacious Remuera home while I wait - the perfect opportunity for some journalistic nose-poking.

Earlier, when I'd told a friend I was writing about food writer Annabel Langbein, his eyes widened and he asked: "Is she for real? We've been watching the TV show and it all looks too good to be true."

He was, of course, talking about the 13-part series *Annabel Langbein The Free Range Cook*, which has been drawing up to 500,000 viewers to TV One on Saturday nights. In each show a casually dressed Annabel wafts through an idyllic South Island landscape, plucking fresh

herbs from the garden or ripe fruit from the orchard before venturing inside a rustic kitchen to throw together meals that look so delicious and achievable that you're inspired to rush out the next morning and buy the ingredients - or at least the sumptuous hardcover book that goes with the series.

It does all look too utopian to be true, but this really is the life Annabel and her husband, farmer and businessman Ted Hewetson, have crafted for themselves.

As I step out into the garden the evidence is incontrovertable. A large chunk of the half-acre section is devoted to a prolific vegetable garden, abundant with artichokes, broccoli, tomatoes, lettuce, broad beans, beetroot, strawberries and fennel. But this is just their city garden - their real garden is at their cabin in Central Otago, the scenic location for the television series. They divide their time



Annabel's casual style belies her business savvy and the global success of Annabel Langbein Media.



between the two homes and grow as much of their food as they can themselves.

When she finally does breeze in the door this evening, Annabel is completely on-brand in jeans, trainers and a slouchy tee. Only her perfect black-painted nails suggest she hasn't been digging potatoes this very morning.

"Authenticity and integrity are really important to me," she says, pouring herself a glass of wine and settling down for a chat in the last of the afternoon sun. "If it wasn't authentic I couldn't do it."

Even the title of the series reflects this: "I like the term 'free range' because it has connotations of being healthy, outdoorsy and natural - a free-spirited approach to cooking. I thought I could use that with authenticity because we are farmers and we do grow our own food. It wasn't as if we had to fabricate anything - we just took a camera and recorded what we do down there.

"Our whole day can be spent thinking about dinner - going to pick cherries, having a picnic, bringing them home for a meal. It has a natural rhythm, and I'm trying to bring that rhythm back into my city life."

The message she is trying to get across in the series is that - rich or poor, rural or urban - we can all bring a little of the good life into our day through cooking and eating well. "The closer you eat to nature the better your experience is going to be - it's fresh and in season."

It's a philosophy that has found resonance not just in New Zealand, but overseas, where the TV series has been sold into 72 countries (the book, self-published by Annabel Langbein Media, will no doubt follow). "I've just got back from two weeks in Paris and London," says Annabel, who is a director on the Sustainability Council of New Zealand. "I wondered whether this message could have resonance in these urban environments, but it can. These people might live in big cities but they are all going to farmers' markets and seeking to reconnect with a more natural way of living."

She is a passionate advocate for her country. "New Zealand is a great place to live and I want to take it out into the world. I believe in us being successful as a country and if I can be part of that, that drives me. This is our time."

It was a case of right product, right time, when scouts from the huge international

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company FremantleMedia Enterprises, which made Jamie Oliver a star, spotted Annabel's cooking videos on YouTube just two years ago.

"I had made these two-minute clips to go with my book *Eat Fresh*," she says. "In each one I started in the garden then I cooked the recipes and ended up eating around the table. They contacted me and said, 'We think you've got something here. Why don't you come up with an idea for a TV series?' and they gave me some seed money to make a pilot."

Her timing was impeccable, with her back-to-nature-without-sacrificing-style message perfectly capturing the mood of a population recovering from recession while also looking for ways to walk more lightly on our beleaguered planet, albeit in their Manolo Blahnik heels.

"I'm just a busy working mum trying to be there for my family and live a responsible life," she says. "I wanted to show people they could grow a bit of their own food, invite friends for a meal, bake a cake when new neighbours move in, take jam to someone when they're sick. Those are the threads that build a community and a good life.

"When you cook you feel useful and rewarded, and when you bring people together around the table you have fun. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, it can do amazing things to your life.

"With the TV series I wanted to go beyond the practical and introduce a feeling of lifestyle by bringing in the sociability element and sharing more of my life and my journey."

And what a journey. In a way, the various threads of Annabel's colourful life so far come together in *The Free Range Cook*, as though her childhood baking at her mother's elbow, her adrenalin-fuelled youth as a possum trapper



Annabel, pictured in her lush Remuera garden, is the face of a new era of stylish sustainability.

and jumping out of helicopters to net deer, her horticulture diploma, her 17 self-published recipe books, her nutritional studies in New York, the seven years she spent marketing New Zealand produce to the world, and her roles as a wife and mother of two were all an apprenticeship that gave her the skills and the unique perspective to become the face of a new era of stylish sustainability.

And running through all her experiences is a common touchstone - food. She remembers stages of her life by the meals she was cooking at the time. Living on a marae at Ranana growing vegetables for the local community: "We had no electricity but I remember bottling fruit and making a pavlova in the camp oven."

Trapping possums in the Ureweras at 17: "We just lived in the bush, lit a fire, cooked dinner."

Living in Gisborne in her early 20s: "I'd set my crayfish pots, shoot pigeons for the pot, stuff a haunch of venison. My mother gave me Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* when I was 17 so I'd cook lobster thermidor and pass it over the back fence to the neighbours."

Running a croissant business in Brazil: "Croissants, croissants, croissants. I ate all my profits."

Looking back now, it seems natural that food would form the basis of her career, but in the early 1980s when the driven young Annabel was setting out, it wasn't an option. "Back then you could be a caterer or a chef but you could never have survived being a food writer."

Then Julia Child changed her life. "I wrote to her and said, 'I'm mad about food. I've been a caterer and I've started writing for the *Listener*, but I don't want to run a restaurant. What can I do?' She was nice enough to write back. She told me the International Association of Culinary Professionals held a conference once a year and she thought I should come. So I did and it became apparent there was this whole world of opportunity there."

Burdened by extra kilos since her days as a Brazilian croissant queen, Annabel enrolled for a course in nutrition at The Culinary Institute of America. "The first day of the nutrition course was an epiphany. They set out this table and everything on it was an 100-calorie equivalent, so I could clearly see why eating more of one type of food would make me fat ▶



- I could eat a little bit of butter as opposed to a huge heap of vegetables.

"They taught us to make food that has lots of flavour without a lot of fat. Fat gives a satisfying mouth feel, so if you don't have fat you have to compensate for that. We learned

to use lots of umami, fresh herbs, citrus juices, reduced stocks and fibre. Now I don't diet.

If I'm getting porky I just eat more fibre and make an effort to avoid processed foods - generally if it comes with a barcode that's a bad sign."

Although most of Annabel's recipes are light and healthy, she takes care not to force that message down people's throats. "You want to do it subliminally otherwise it's really boring." Watching the television series or flicking through the book, you're drawn to cook the dishes not because they're good for you, but because she makes it look like so much fun.

"My style of cooking is to get from a set of ingredients to something really delicious in the shortest possible time so I can get on with doing something else."

It's hard to imagine Annabel sitting still long enough to put on weight anyway. Blessed with seemingly limitless energy, she admits she's something of a workaholic - or would be if she didn't have Ted to keep her in check. "He's lots of fun and he brings that out in me because I can take myself far too seriously. I'm driven by the idea of making an idea work. I always have so many ideas and I used to think if you had an idea you had to do it, whereas now I can let things go."

Having Sean, now 18, and Rose, 16, helped teach her to slow down, too. "When I first had the children I kept working. I had offices in Parnell and a staff of 12.

"My mother was a home sciences graduate who made the decision she didn't want to work, so she stayed home and cooked delicious meals and made us beautiful clothes. I completely railed against that. I thought she was a doormat. But later I realised women of my age made a rod for our own backs thinking that we could have it all and do it all. Maybe you can for a while, but

eventually something gives and usually it's you."

When Rose was two Annabel hit a wall, and took a year off publishing books to be with the children. "You think you can't take time out, but it's such a short window of time," she says.

When she did start to slowly rebuild her work, she tailored it to fit around her children, working from home and sharing parenting with Ted. "I was really lucky to have married the man I married, who was utterly committed to making sure we were a strong family. He supported my free spirit and was always home with the kids while I was away."

Even when Annabel was at her busiest, the family made time to enjoy the ritual of sharing a meal each night. "Even now Ted will light the candles, even if it's just him and I," says Annabel.

With Rose boarding at King's College and Sean studying science at Trinity College in Melbourne, the couple are experiencing something of a second honeymoon. "When you've got little kids it's like a treadmill but when your children grow up and leave home you can just hang out together again and really enjoy each other's company."

They're also enjoying working together for the first time. "I dragged him in to help with my business because it has got complicated," says Annabel. "If you give me a balance sheet my eyes glaze over, whereas he's really good at it. We've been working together a year and we're both surprised at how well it's working - we haven't scrapped at all.

"When you're young it's much easier to judge and be critical, whereas when you get older you think, 'I'm so lucky to have you in my life.'"

Although she claims Ted is the brains of the partnership, it's clear that Annabel has a smart head for business too. About five years ago she received a market development grant from New Zealand Trade and Enterprise and used it to refine her brand and form the business plan that has helped guide her current international trajectory.

"Before that I was like a rocket going off without thinking about what I was doing or where I was going. Then I realised if you have a big picture and you want to make it happen, you need a structure and a plan. It doesn't take away your creativity or impetus but it does



Annabel says managing her many ventures is like working on a giant jigsaw puzzle.

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help you focus that energy.

"I sometimes think it's like a really big jigsaw puzzle. I feel like I've worked out about this much," she says, marking off with her hands less than a quarter of the 10-seater outdoor table. "I know what that part looks like but I haven't put the pieces in yet."

With *The Free Range Cook* about to launch her into international stardom and a second series in planning, the rest of us are about to see that picture fall into place. ▶

The recipes Annabel favours are light and healthy without being obviously so - they are also fast!

HAIR AND MAKEUP CLAUDIA RODRIGUES STYLIST EMMA AUBIN

## Annabel's Menu

Next asked Annabel to put together a festive menu for readers, using recipes in *The Free Range Cook*

### Starter

- Herb Fritters with Smoked Salmon

### Main

- Crispy Pork Belly with Roasted Pepper Pesto
- Crunchy New Potatoes with Thyme
- Green Beans with Lemon

### Dessert

- Pistachio and Berry Ice Cream



## Herb Fritters with Smoked Salmon

These fritters can be made in bulk ahead of time. Quickly brown them, then finish them in a 180°C oven for 8-10 minutes until spongy to the touch.

**Prep time:** 5 mins + 15 mins standing time

**Cook time:** 4-5 mins per batch

**Makes:** 60 small or 30 medium fritters

1½ cups plain flour  
3 tsp baking powder  
3 eggs  
1 cup soda water or water, chilled  
1 tsp salt  
Ground black pepper  
½ cup finely chopped basil  
Finely grated zest of 1 lemon  
2-3 tsp neutral oil or spray oil

### To serve:

150g thinly sliced smoked salmon  
½ cup sour cream and sprigs of dill

**1** To make the fritter base batter, combine the flour,

baking powder, eggs, soda water or water (the soda water makes the fritters particularly light), salt and pepper in a mixing bowl, beating to make a smooth batter. Cover and stand for 15 minutes or for up to 4 hours in the fridge.

**2** Stir chopped herbs and lemon zest into the rested batter. Heat a heavy frying pan over a medium heat and coat or spray lightly with the oil. Drop small spoonfuls of mixture into the hot pan and cook until bubbles form in the mixture, then turn to cook the other side. Fritters are cooked when they bounce back when pressed gently. Lightly re-oil pan between batches.

**3** Top each fritter with a slice of smoked salmon, a little sour cream and a sprig of dill.

## Roasted Pepper Pesto

The rich red colour of this pesto sauce looks particularly festive.

**Prep time** 20 mins

**Cook time** 25 mins + 20 mins cooling

**Makes** 2 cups

6 red peppers  
¼ cup extra virgin olive oil  
2 cloves garlic, crushed  
1 tsp paprika (plain)  
1 tsp smoked paprika  
¼ cup almonds, roasted  
¼ cup fresh coriander, chopped  
Salt and ground black pepper

**1** Rinse the peppers and pat dry. Place them on a baking tray and roast at 240°C for about 15-20 minutes until the skin is blistered and blackened. Remove from the oven and cover with a teatowel or put in a plastic bag to sweat. This will make it much easier to remove the skins later. Set aside to cool.

**2** While the peppers cool, heat the oil in a small pan and sizzle the garlic and paprika for a few seconds. This helps bring out their flavour. Place this mixture in a food processor or blender.

**3** Remove the skins and seeds from the peppers, saving the juices if you can. Place the flesh and any reserved juices in the food processor or blender with the garlic and paprika mixture. Add the almonds and coriander. Season with salt and pepper and purée

## Green Beans with Lemon

Par-cook the beans ahead of time to ensure you don't end up with over-cooked, grey beans.

**Prep time** 5 mins

**Cook time** 6 mins

**Serves** 6

10-12 handfuls (500-600g) green beans  
2 tsp extra virgin olive oil  
Finely grated zest of 1 lemon

2-3 tbsp water

Salt and ground black pepper

**1** Cut off the stalk ends of the green beans and check for any strings, running a potato peeler down each side if required.

**2** If you like your beans al dente, drop them into a pot of boiling water and cook for 3 minutes. Drain and cool under cold water. This can be done ahead of time.

If you prefer your beans crunchier, skip this step.

**3** When you are ready to serve the dish, heat the oil in a medium saucepan with the lemon zest. Add the beans with the water, salt and pepper. Stir-fry for 2-3 minutes until just tender.

## Crunchy New Potatoes with Thyme

I love the crunchy texture of these new potatoes. You only need to break the skin of the potatoes with a fork, not mash them fully. This gives a lovely scrunched surface that crisps up wonderfully and absorbs the herb flavour.

**Prep time** 5 mins

**Cook time** 50 mins

**Serves** 6-8

1.5-2kg baby new potatoes, scrubbed  
2 tsp extra virgin olive oil  
2 tsp fresh thyme leaves or 1 tsp dried thyme  
1 tsp flaky sea salt

**1** Preheat oven to 200°C. Boil the potatoes for 10 minutes in lightly salted water. Drain well and transfer to a roasting dish. Use a fork to break the skins and slightly flatten the potatoes.

**2** Drizzle with oil, sprinkle with thyme and flaky salt and roast until crispy and golden – about 40 minutes. Serve hot. ▶



## Crispy Pork Belly

The key to great pork crackling is to dry the skin side of the meat well before sprinkling it with salt. Blast the pork in a hot oven to begin with to get the skin crunchy, then slow cook it for a further hour and a half in a bath of milk, which makes it really moist and tender. This is a very traditional way to cook pork belly – one I learned from Elizabeth David's books.

**Prep time** 5 mins

**Cook time** 2 hours

**Serves** 6

1-1.2kg pork belly, skin scored  
Ground black pepper  
1 tsp salt

2-3 sage leaves

2-2½ cups milk

**To serve:** Roasted Pepper Pesto

**1** Preheat oven to 240°C. Pat the skin of the meat dry

and season the flesh side with pepper and half the salt. Sprinkle the sage leaves on the bottom of a baking dish and put the pork on top, skin side up. Season the top with the remaining salt.

**2** Roast for 20-30 minutes at 240°C until the skin is starting to blister and crackle. Watch closely for burning.

**3** Pour the milk around the meat to come about half to two-thirds of the way up the sides of the pork. Reduce the heat to 160°C and roast

for a further 1½ hours or until the meat is meltingly tender. Check the level of liquid during cooking and if it has evaporated add a little more to the pan.

**4** Remove the pork from the oven, lift it out of the dish and allow it to cool. Discard the liquids.

**5** For easy cutting, place the meat flesh side up on a chopping board and use a heavy, sharp knife to cut it into slices about 3-4cm thick. Serve warm or at room temperature with Roasted Pepper Pesto.



## Pistachio and Berry Ice-Cream

If you've never made ice-cream before, this is the one to try. All you need is three bowls and an electric beater. A brilliant recipe to make a day or two ahead of time.

**Prep time 20 mins +  
at least 4 hours freezing  
time**  
**Makes 2.5 litres**

### Pistachio flavouring:

1 cup currants  
¼ cup rum, amaretto or  
other liqueur or ¼ cup fruit  
juice  
1 cup glacé pineapple,  
apricots or paw paw, finely  
chopped  
Finely grated zest of 1 lemon  
1 cup shelled unsalted

pistachio nuts  
1 cup fresh or frozen  
raspberries

### Ice-cream base:

3 eggs  
10 tbsp caster sugar, divided  
in half  
2 tbsp boiling water  
2 cups cream, chilled

**1** Line two 30-cm loaf tins or a 2.5-litre container with baking paper. To prepare the pistachio flavouring, put the

currants in a medium bowl and pour over the rum, liqueur or fruit juice. Stir, then set aside to steep for a minimum of 15 minutes or microwave for 1 minute. The alcohol helps to give the ice-cream a soft texture, but the more you use the softer the ice-cream will be, so don't overdo it. Stir in the pineapple, apricots or paw paw, plus the lemon zest and pistachio nuts. Reserve the berries to add later.

**2** To make the ice-cream base, separate the eggs. Place the egg whites in the largest bowl and the egg yolks in a smaller bowl, ensuring no yolk gets mixed in with the whites. Add 5 tbsp of the caster sugar

to the egg whites and beat until the mixture forms stiff peaks – about 6-7 minutes. Set aside.

**3** Add the remaining 5 tbsp of caster sugar and the boiling water to the bowl containing the three egg yolks. Beat until pale, thick and ribbony. You will know it is ready when it holds a figure of eight.

**4** In a third bowl, beat the cream to soft peaks. Try not to overwhip it, but if you do, add a bit more cold cream and beat again. Gently fold the egg yolks and cream into the beaten egg whites using a large flat spoon.

**5** Add the pistachio mixture and fold together. Fold in the raspberries right at the end, reserving a few berries for a garnish. Pour the mixture into the prepared loaf tins or container.

**6** Freeze for at least 4 hours, or preferably overnight, until set.

If you're freezing the ice-cream for longer, be sure to cover it to prevent freezer burn or flavour taint. To serve, lift the ice-cream out of the tin or container, cut it into slices and garnish with fresh raspberries.



All recipes from *Annabel Langbein The Free Range Cook*. \$59.99