

Nourishing the soul

Into the MELTING POT

ANNABEL LANGBEIN'S NEW WANAKA KITCHEN STUDIO ISN'T JUST A KITCHEN OR JUST A FILM STUDIO. IT'S A HOME FOR THE IDEAS AND RECIPES AND BITS AND PIECES SHE PICKS UP FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD

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The view can't help sneaking in or admiring its own reflection and on Wanaka's famously hot, sunny days the windows and doors slide back to create a deliciously cool and shady veranda; daughter Rose is a student in Melbourne but during university breaks is often called into service as a film extra, a kitchen hand or as Annabel's assistant and gofer during cooking demonstrations around the world.





FROM ABOVE: Plenty of space around the kitchen island allows for camera gear and crew. The big steel stove is a La Cornue, the Rolls Royce of ovens (you can buy them from FL Bone), and there's another oven under the work bench; Rose's friends are among the endless stream of visitors to the kitchen.

YOU NEED A LOT of stamina to keep up with Annabel Langbein when she's on a mission overseas. She's not just spreading her philosophy of growing, cooking and eating healthy food, but also promoting her books and TV shows and, most of all, New Zealand. On top of that, she's constantly researching, looking for new inspiration. To keep up, you have to get up horribly early.

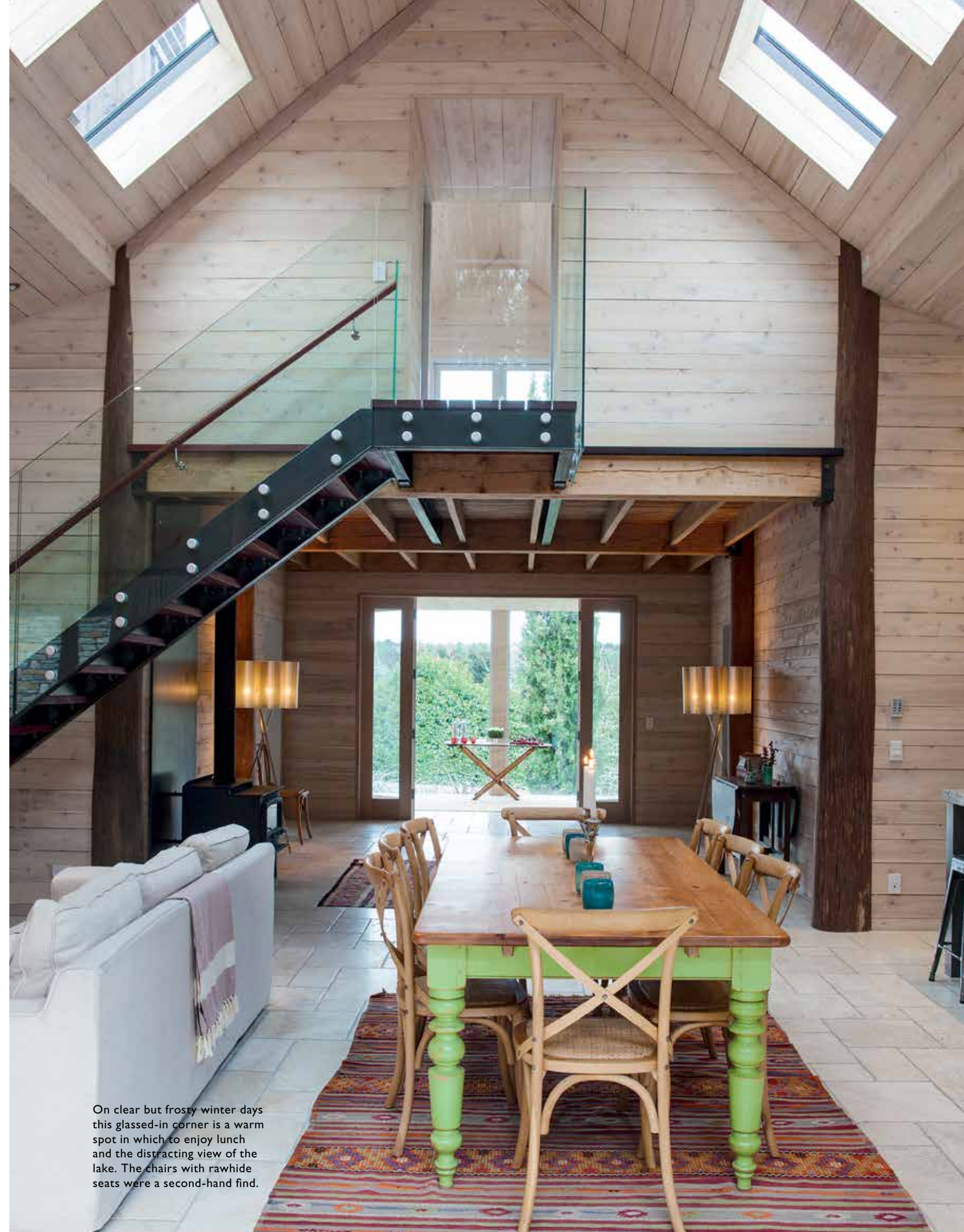
It's 5.00am on a pebbly beach in Turkey. Nosy goats are watching nosy Annabel watching a muscular Turk beating the bejeezus out of a sticky mass of bread dough. It's enormous – enough for 70 loaves– so it's a serious workout for him. By the time he's battered it into submission he's dripping with sweat and covered in white goo. I wonder how he's going to wash it off as there's no obvious sign of running water. I don't have to wonder for long. He leaps into the sea and tiny fish immediately swarm around to nibble him clean. Annabel is shrieking with delight at the bizarreness of it all.

It's a typical day at work for her (well, typical in that every day she finds new things to excite her, and typical in that every day turns out differently than expected). She'd seen the tiny boat that putt-putted around the bay selling round loaves of crumpetty bread. I knew they made it in wood ovens on the edge of the beach, but not how they made it. Annabel is always in research mode, seeking out food ideas and bringing them back to her husband-designed, brand-new kitchen in Wanaka, where recipes are tested and tested and tested some more until they're perfect. It was tricky making the breadmaker understand that she wanted to come and watch him at work but he finally agreed she could turn up the next morning.

While Annabel is something of a linguist with a fistful of languages in which she's reasonably proficient, Turkish isn't one of them. Luckily, she's an expert at charades. Many of her best recipes and ideas have come from people who don't speak English or any of the more common languages. ▶

Annabel says for the new TV series she pillaged second-hand shops around the country and clocked up a few online miles with her fingers. She grew up with the Mason's china cups and is now adding to the collection. Ted just sighs as she lugs home yet another huge platter that will challenge the airline's baggage restrictions.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Her International tractor from the mid-1970s is one of the objects of Annabel's affection; she's an avid collector of books – novels and non-fiction as well as cookbooks; the collecting habit extends to lovely dry driftwood; with so many fires it's just as well there's so much firewood on hand. Ted has planted thousands of trees; fruits, nuts, exotics and natives all thrive.

On clear but frosty winter days this glassed-in corner is a warm spot in which to enjoy lunch and the distracting view of the lake. The chairs with rawhide seats were a second-hand find.



Annabel never comes inside without armfuls of produce to use in her cooking or to give away to anyone visiting. It's the same when she comes home from her travels. Little bottles of olive oil, goat bells hung from hand-woven goat-hair ropes, crisp Dutch waffle biscuits sandwiched with spiced caramel... everything is shared and used and enjoyed by everyone. Her handbag rivals Mary Poppins' carpet-bag for the surprises she pulls out of it.

Of course there is always the potential for major confusion. At one market a man was selling home-made syrups and jams with handwritten labels that we couldn't understand. A lemony-looking cordial had him miming coughing and drinking the syrup, so we guessed it was for sore throats. One of the jams looked like pale Vegemite and Annabel mimed spreading it on bread and eating it. The stallholder looked horrified and ran off for help, coming back a few minutes later with a piece of paper saying "haemorrhoid cream".

With her brand growing so fast, Annabel is travelling more and more. Turkey is only one of 93 countries in which her TV show *The Free Range Cook* is shown; America will get its first taste next year. She travels with her husband and business partner Ted and, while they have a great team to handle everything back home, Annabel still organizes most of the hotel and flight bookings herself. While some meetings can be set up in advance, their plans have to stay fluid as they always find, or are found by, new people who want to discuss ideas with them.

Sometimes bookings have to be made quickly and that can cause problems. They were horrified to discover that the elegant Paris apartment they'd booked online in which to host an important dinner was not the bargain they'd thought. There was an extra zero in the daily rate but there was no time to change the venue. When the owner heard that Annabel had been demonstrating New Zealand cooking at the Louvre and had invited some of the guests to dinner, he not only dropped the pesky zero but brought out all his best cutlery and crockery and set up the dining room to perfection. He came to the dinner and now is a good friend.

While her food is considered New Zealand food, it's really world food. Annabel sees herself as a conduit. She collects ideas and recipes from everywhere she goes, takes them home and simplifies them, then sends them out to the rest of the world again. The idea has come from somewhere else, but after it's been to her kitchen studio it's been given an Annabel twist and a New Zealand accent.

The kitchen studio is the busiest place imaginable. It's not just ideas coming together but people from all over the world coming in and out of the Wanaka hub: gardeners, photographers, journalists, politicians, electricians, bloggers and scientists (and that was just in one day). Anyone else would find it exhausting but busy, busy is how Annabel lives her life every day.

Someone asked her recently what she'd have done differently in her life if she'd known she couldn't fail. Probably nothing – she believes so wholeheartedly in her ideas for a healthy, happy, sustainable lifestyle that she can't see how she could fail to follow the same path. She is very lucky, but she does make her own luck. She's wonderfully bold and unafraid to ask questions and favours and not hesitant at making people put things right. ▶



“I'm greedy about everything, especially life”



FAVOURITE BOOKS

How on earth Annabel ever finds the time to read is a miracle, but her favourite foodie/travel writers are William Dalrymple, Bruce Chatwin, David Tanis, Michael Pollan and MFK Fisher. She didn't mention Lonely Planet's *A Fork in the Road*, so I will. It's a collection of wonderful travel stories. She was asked to contribute and her firewater-fuzzed memories of a dodgy night with strangers in Brazil is typical of the way she finds fun in extraordinary places.

FOODIE FINDS

Annabel is a great finder of foodie treats, sometimes right under her nose.

- Yuzu paste in a supermarket in Tokyo. It adds an exotic citrus note to mayonnaise, dressings, marinades and sauces.
- Sumac, growing in my garden. Staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*) produces displays of brilliant autumn colour all around Wanaka and is the very same sumac you eat.
- Shishito peppers in the Union Square market in New York and Padron peppers in Borough Market in London. Pan-fry in a little oil and sprinkle with salt for a gorgeous snack.

Nothing tastes better than food cooked over wood or charcoal. Annabel is a fire addict and always keen to try new systems. She says the big outdoor fireplace from Warmington throws out a lot of heat and is fabulous to cook on (it has a little oven at the top) and she loves the wood-fired Smartie pizza oven for long, slow roasting and making puffy breads; Ted designed the door handles as a soft element. He wanted a handmade look that would allow the doors to fold flat against the walls so drew a picture and had them made by a local saddler.



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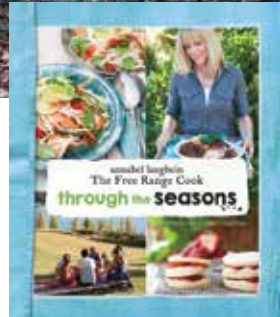
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On even the coldest days it's no effort to slip down to the lake for drinks and nibbles, warmed by a home-made brazier and plenty of rugs.



There are five Annabel Langbein *The free range cook through the seasons* to be won. Go to nzlifeandleisure.co.nz/competitions

The vegetable man at the market gets a flea in his ear when he delivers the inferior produce he has substituted for her choices. The restaurant owner who deliberately misled us about the price of whole fish won't be swindling other visitors in a hurry. It's quite un-New Zealandy to complain, but she does it nicely and she's right.

She's equally demanding of herself. It's not just her recipes that have to be exactly right but with so many businesses wanting to be associated with the Annabel brand she's very particular about the products she endorses. Her message is one that has appeal for companies wanting to ally themselves with the idea of fresh, sustainable, fun and healthy lifestyles.

The New Zealandness of her brand couldn't be more helpful either. When New Zealand was the guest nation at the Frankfurt Book Fair, Andrew Patterson's dramatic design saw record numbers of people – tens of thousands – queuing for hours to get into the pavilion. There wasn't room for even one more tiny body to squeeze in when Annabel, Al Brown and Peter Gordon were on stage for a discussion about New Zealand food. The mainly German audience groaned with envy as these great Kiwi cooks chatted about how best to prepare a bucket of scallops fresh from the sea. The image of New Zealand as a lush and lovely paradise far from the political turmoil and pollution woes of the rest of the world is very helpful not just to our tourism industry but to our food producers and winemakers... all the businesses that carry the magic New Zealand tag.

That's the picture Annabel paints of New Zealand. While she benefits every time a book or TV show is sold, New Zealand benefits even more. Every time one of her books is opened, or another of her shows is viewed, someone falls in love with our country and our lifestyle.

