



# THE alchemist

**Although he is renowned as an actor, Sam Neill grew up in a wine selling family and became the first of his clan to make wine. He reveals a love of Pinot Noir and an aversion to the celebrity winemaker tag to **Lucy Shaw****

**SAM NEILL** is very particular about his eggs. During our breakfast meeting in the plush, velvet armchair-filled member's bar at Quo Vadis in London's Soho, the actor turned winemaker seems keen for the waitress to get his order exactly right: two soft boiled eggs with toasted brown bread and marmalade on the side. Now 66 years old, one gets the impression he's become accustomed to liking things just so. A fully-fledged silver fox, his bright blue eyes still sparkle with mischief and mouth often curls into a wry smile. He has a knowing air, a sharpened wit and a wonderfully dry sense of humour.

Best of all for an actor, Neill doesn't take himself too seriously, and makes quips at his own expense on a number of occasions during the interview.

Born Nigel Neill in 1947 to an English mother and third generation New

## His wine epiphany came in 1979 by way of actor and mentor James Mason

Zealander father – Harrow and Sandhurst-educated Dermot Neill – in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, where Neill Sr. was serving as an officer in the Royal Irish Fusiliers, Neill moved with his family to New Zealand aged seven and took to calling himself Sam at school, believing Nigel was too effete for an antipodean playground. He studied English literature at the University of Canterbury but, while acting became his calling, with roles in *Dead Calm*, *Jurassic Park* and *The Piano* in the early '90s making Neill a household name, a sideline in wine seems preordained given his family history. His grandfather owned

Neill & Co, which, in its heyday, was one of the largest wine and spirits importers in New Zealand. "I don't remember a life without wine," Neill begins. "The men in my family were either soldiers or wine merchants, or both, but I was the first to actually make wine," he notes, though takes exception to being called a "celebrity" winemaker.

"I don't like the tag because people groan if they hear a wine has been made by a celebrity and presume it must not be any good. I've been making wine for 20 years and don't want to be lumped into that category," he bristles.

### FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Rather than a diet of Burgundy one might expect given his all-consuming passion for Pinot Noir, the young Sam Neill, who suffered from a stammer as a child, was brought up on claret. "There was never any talk of Burgundy in our household as my father was primarily involved in selling Bordeaux, so that was what was on the dinner table," he says, bemoaning a lack of wine knowledge in the country at the time: "Wine really wasn't discussed much in New Zealand back then – people drank brandy, or whisky, or G&T; there was more of a spirits than a wine culture."

His wine epiphany came in 1979 by way of actor and mentor James Mason. Staying with Mason on Lake Geneva, he was taken to dinner at L'Auberge de L'Onde, a favourite haunt of Charlie Chaplin, who had died two years earlier. Sat at Chaplin's table, where he'd carved his name into the wall, Mason ordered a bottle of Gevrey Chambertin. "I remember it being like an alarm going off in my head. It was the most hauntingly beautiful thing I'd ever tasted. James explained that it came from Burgundy, which was the first I'd heard of the region, as I was impoverished back then and surviving on the dregs from

cardboard boxes. It flicked a switch and I was hooked from that moment onwards," Neill recalls nostalgically.

That first memorable encounter with the whimsical charms of Pinot sparked a flame. Returning to London, he quickly set about fuelling his passion, buying cases of Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet to enjoy with friends in his flat off the Edgware Road. "My introduction to Burgundy came through the whites, which, remarkably, were still pretty affordable in those days, but I soon worked my way up to the reds," he says.

Just over a decade later, Neill discovered that it was possible to grow Pinot Noir successfully where he lived – Central Otago on the South Island. Blown away by the quality of the 1991 and 1992 vintages of Rippon, founded by the late Rolfe Mills, Neill wanted in on the action and set about finding a suitable plot of land where he could plant his beloved Pinot Noir, starting out with two hectares in Gibbston in 1993. "I'd make enemies if I said Central Otago was the best region in New Zealand for Pinot Noir, but we do make some fantastic examples. Saying that, Canterbury and Martinborough have been producing fabulous Pinots of late," Neill concedes.

Production of his two single vineyard Pinots is small, capped at just 100 cases each per vintage. The wines are made two to three times a decade when the grapes are of high enough quality to be able to stand alone as a solo act. "At £50 a bottle, I think my two single vineyard wines are extremely reasonable for the quality you get from them. I'm confident that they merit their price tags. Burgundy produces some wonderful Pinots but many of them are vastly overpriced, while I think New Zealand Pinots on the whole are vastly underpriced," he offers. While Neill believes his flagship Pinot, Two Paddocks, would be deemed a higher quality wine, he prefers the quiriness of his two single vineyard offerings.

"Choosing a favourite of my three Pinots is like having to choose between my three





Neill with Angelica the pig

children. They're all different and all have their charm, but I love the individuality you get from single vineyard Pinot," Neill reveals.

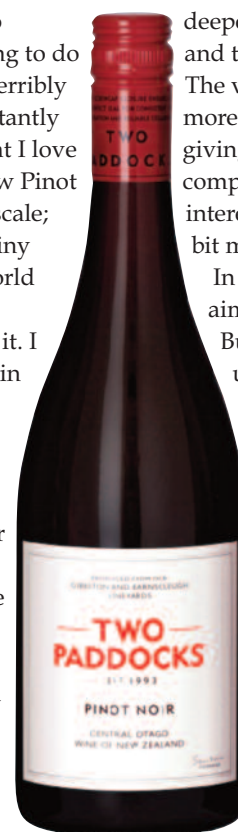
And while growing the thin-skinned grape hasn't been without its challenges,

## Pinot Noir is the most interesting grape variety in the world as it expresses itself in an infinite number of ways

Neill seems as deeply in love with Pinot today as he was when he first discovered it. "Pinot Noir is the most interesting grape variety in the world as it expresses itself in an infinite number of ways, and

when it works it creates wines of such beauty and divinity, it's hard to believe that you've had anything to do with them," he gushes. "It's a terribly hard grape to grow and is constantly challenging you, but that's what I love about it. You can't grow Pinot Noir on an industrial scale; it's confined to a few tiny pockets around the world where you have to use your hands to nurture it. I like the craft involved in Pinot production, and that only the most patient of producers can help it reach its full potential. No other grape has the same charisma and the same frenzied following –

there's a lovely camaraderie between Pinot growers; we feel each other's pain and pat each other on the back for being poor lucky bastards."



Given Pinot's finicky nature, wouldn't it have been easier to work with the reliable and bountiful Sauvignon Blanc instead? "Sauvignon Blanc is the Trojan horse that took New Zealand wine to the world, but I'm not interested in making it as I've never really liked it. When it comes to whites, I'm much more interested in Riesling," he admits.

### CHANGE OF GRAPE

Practicing what he preaches, Neill produces small quantities of two Rieslings: the entry-level, off-dry Picnic and higher end Two Paddocks Riesling, both of which are made at his Redbank estate in Alexandra. "I decided to make Riesling because for years my wife refused to drink red wine," Neill jokes. "Since embarking on the venture, I've become really geeky about the grape and am into seeking out examples from Alsace, Austria and South Australia, although I'm not sure about the kerosene thing; it doesn't really do it for me."

Now the vines at his original Two Paddocks vineyard in Gibbston have reached the golden age of 20, has he noticed an improvement in the quality of the wines being made from the grapes?

"The more mature your vines get, the deeper the roots venture into the soil and the more you get from the grapes. The vines seem to be taking things more in their stride now, which is giving the wines more depth and complexity. They've always been interesting, but they're giving that little bit more now," he observes.

In terms of the style of Pinot he's aiming to produce, while he looks to Burgundy as a quality template, his ultimate goal is to make wines that bear the stamp of their Central Otago postcode rather than churning out ripe, juicy, fruit forward Pinots that fit the mould of what consumers believe New World Pinot Noir to be. "I've neither felt the pressure nor the desire to make that kind of Pinot. I don't like that style and have always gone against the grain. I prefer to make more classical, restrained Pinots. Our winemaker, Dean Shaw, is a wild



# The Sichel 1883

## A tale of Two Paddocks

While carrying out all of the obligatory soil tests, ultimately, it was intuition that guided Sam Neill to Gibbston. "You need to feel an affinity with a place. It needs to speak to you in some way. I scoped out a few sites but quickly formed an attachment to the land I settled upon," he says.

Starting out in 1993 with two hectares in Gibbston and the aim of making Pinot Noir for his friends and family, ambition soon got the better of him and in 1998 he snapped up the three-hectare Alex Paddocks vineyard in Alexandra. Two years later, Neill acquired a 50-hectare farm in Alexandra nestled between two rocky escarpments. Christened Redbank after its red clay soil, the site serves as the estate's headquarters and is home to Neill's ever expanding menagerie of sheep, cows and pigs. Keen to be as self sufficient as possible, in addition to grapes, Neill grows apricots, cherries and saffron, and makes essential oil from the lavender dotted around the farm.

The 10 hectares of Pinot planted at Redwood serve as the backbone for Neill's flagship Pinot, Two Paddocks. His single vineyard The Last Chance comes from Alex Paddocks, while First Paddock hails from the original Two Paddocks vineyard.

He reveals plans for the future, saying: "I'm about to plant Pinot in a new one-hectare vineyard in memory of my late father, but after than I'm done with expanding. Two Paddocks will never get bigger than 16 hectares and 6,000 cases a year - small is beautiful."



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Vines in Gibbston

man but a quiet winemaker," he says.

Neill's three Pinots are all distinct, from the brooding and dark fruited The Last Chance, to the delicate and elegant First Paddock. Does he feel there is a signature thread that runs through all three? "They all have a savoury edge with a dark red fruit profile and spicy notes. There's a lot of wild thyme growing around The Last Chance vineyard, which has definitely made its way into the wine the way eucalyptus does in Coonawarra Cabernets," he reveals. Having bottled under screwcap since 1997, Neill is

adamant that he would never switch back to cork, despite protestations from certain pockets of the industry that wine ages more gracefully under cork.

#### SEEKING CLOSURE

"I'd never ever go back. I don't believe that a cork assists in any way in the ageing of a wine. If it allows air in then it's failing in its job as a seal. Too many corks get infected; it's too much of a risk. Our wines are ageing well under screwcap. Forget all that romance bollocks about the sound of pulling a

cork; my heart sinks when I have to reach for my corkscrew – give me the crack of a screwcap any day," he quips.

While regular acting work often separates Neill from his vines, like film-making, he believes the secret to running a successful estate lies in teamwork. "For a film or a wine to work, you need a committed team of people around you that enjoy working together and love what they do. Both involve a certain amount of alchemy. Sometimes all the elements can be present and correct and you still end up with a prosaic wine or a dull film. There's no rhyme or reason to it, but when the magic happens you make something wonderful," he muses. With a new series of early 1920s Birmingham-based TV crime drama *Peaky Blinders*, in

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which Neill plays inspector Chester Campbell, set to film a second series in the new year, he isn't ready to give acting the boot just yet. "I never want to give up acting, but I think it might give me up one day. When you're only cast as incontinent grand-dads uttering their last words in their pyjamas, then you know you're getting past your sell-by date," he admits.

Having mastered both disciplines, does he prefer acting or grape growing? "I love doing both," he proclaims, adding, "Life on the farm is so different to life on the road. I'd turn into a drunken hillbilly if I was at home all the time, but it's such a tonic to get back to the land. In a way, I think more than acting, my wine estate is my life's legacy." *dlb*