

TEXT NICK STOCK

One More Paddock

Two Paddocks vigneron Sam Neill has added another pinot noir vineyard to his collection of Central Otago properties, and this one could be the *pièce de résistance*.

SAM NEILL IS WELL-SUITED to the life he has chosen (alongside acting) as a vigneron. It's a task that requires serious commitment to cultivation and vinification, along with the convivial, social and generously celebratory world in which bottles are opened and enjoyed. This all comes naturally for Neill.

His connection to Central Otago runs deep. Seduced by the place, Neill chose this breathtakingly scenic part of New Zealand as home some years ago, and subsequently fostered a taste for the region's pinot noir.

One thing led to another, as often happens when good wine is around, and he undertook the challenge to establish his first vineyard from scratch in Central Otago's Gibbston Valley in 1993. "No-one warned me that this becomes obsessive," he says with a smile.

This first vineyard was created with a genuine purpose and a long-term outlook. Several clones were selected, some planted on

perched along the north face. "One of these is the most southerly vineyard in the world, there may be a matter of only feet in it," Neill says. "There is nothing beyond this, it's two degrees further south than anything in Chile or Tasmania." The plantings here were staggered across two years in 1999 and 2000 and the grapes are set aside for a single-vineyard pinot noir called The Last Chance.

A second, very different site in Alexandra was acquired shortly after. Redbank is a former government agricultural research site and Neill retained plantings of various orchard crops and herbs, which make for beautiful surrounds, and planted five smaller blocks to pinot noir and two to riesling.

Neill's acquired knowledge of regional differences and more than 20 years of making Central Otago pinot noir has culminated in a new vineyard acquisition, taking his land under vine to just shy of 20 hectares. Located


different expressions of pinot, yet with a clear familial resemblance.

Structurally they are among the most well-defined wines in the region; they are less showy, more profound and deeply complex. The new vineyard will undoubtedly deliver another very different style of pinot noir. Geographically it is in the middle of First Paddock and Alex Paddocks and in terms of wine style, it is a part of the subregion that delivers fleshy mid-palate presence and waves of dark-fruited flavour.

It is also the first time Neill has bought an established vineyard (it was planted in 2000), so it was straight into action with the 2014 harvest. There are two distinct terraces, both gently facing north, stepping down to an occasionally running creek at the base of the site. It's six hectares of prime Bannockburn vineyard, solely planted to pinot noir, and with enough difference throughout the topography to create a subtle mosaic effect.

"I'm calling it The Fusilier," Neill says, surveying the vineyard from the opposite ridge, "which is a name for my father." There's a sense of pride in him as he stands there – a sense of admiration, of dedication and of excitement. His father Dermot was a major and Fusilier in the Irish army.

After 21 years producing great Central Otago pinot noir, Sam Neill and his Two Paddocks (now comprising four vineyards) stand on the edge of a new phase. "As we get more familiar with ourselves, with our own land and our own encounters, I've come to realise just how important experience is when making wine," he says.

And while the experience he takes into this latest vineyard is considerably more than when he surveyed his first Gibbston Valley plot, you get the sense that his fascination with contributing to the world of great wine is just as pure, his drive to succeed just as strong and his relish of the challenge just as constant. Neill has built a considerable stake in Central Otago and this latest acquisition is likely to be the jewel in the crown. 

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their own roots, some on rootstock and a rootstock trial was also undertaken. The first vintage from what has since become to be known as First Paddock, arrived in 1997.

But Neill quickly became aware of the marginal nature of the Gibbston Valley. "One year in three it is fantastic, one year can be a write-off and one year pretty good," he muses.

Recognising the need to offset the risky Gibbston Valley location in order to guarantee supply, he set about finding a second property. He bought land and planted vines at the other end of the region in Alexandra as a sort of insurance scheme. He had now established another vineyard, also at the extreme of marginality, but one that has proved to be more reliable, oddly enough.

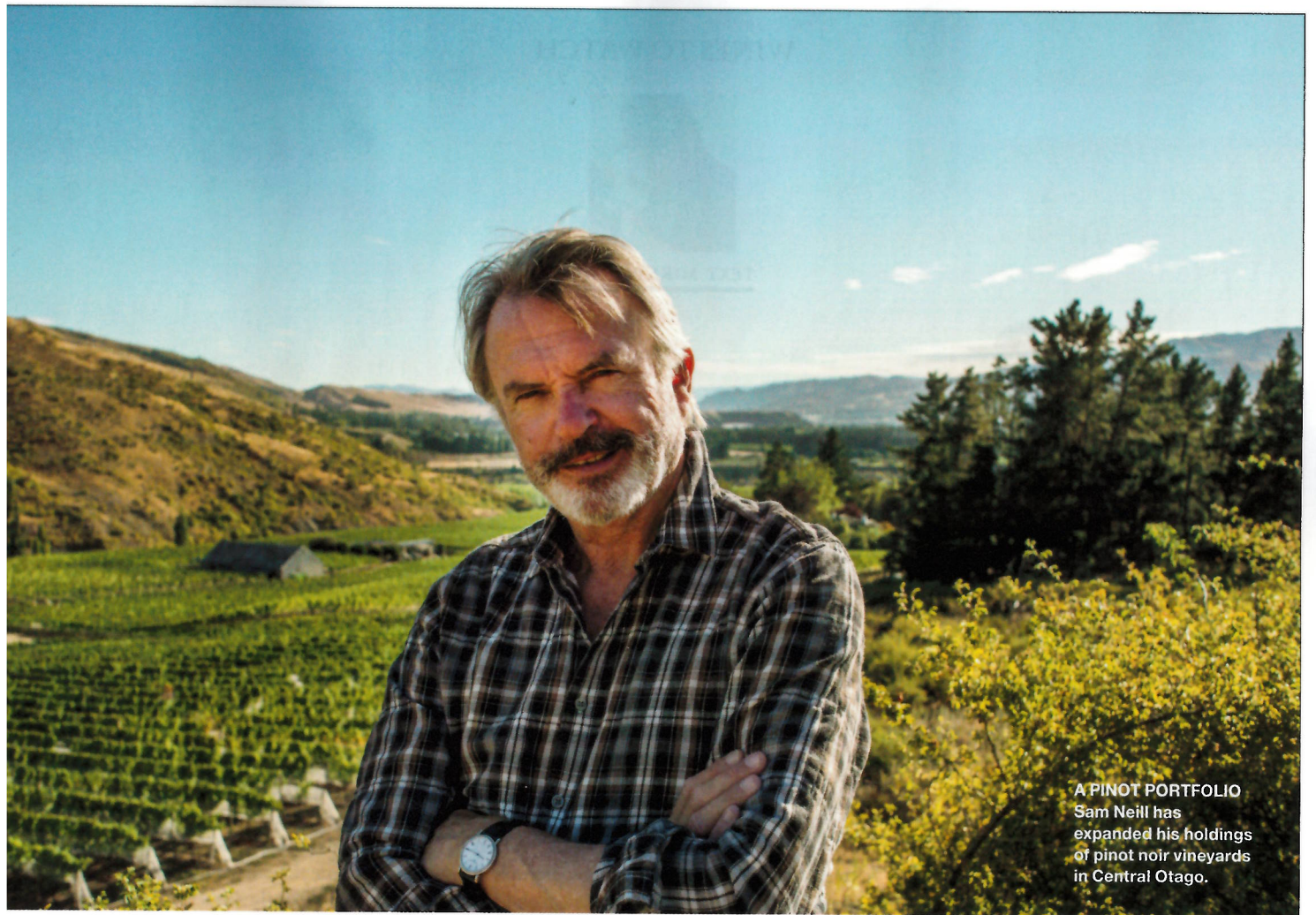
Known as Alex Paddocks, it is essentially a collection of three plots clustered together on the east-west ridge at the bottom of Alexandra and one of just a handful of vineyards

in Bannockburn, right up the end of Felton Road, Neill recently purchased the Desert Heart vineyard, re-naming it The Fusilier.

There are many great possibilities for vineyard sites in Central Otago, but this stretch of Bannockburn is akin to a vinous golden mile. It enjoys reliable warmth and produces a luxurious style of pinot, bathed in flesh and flavour. "It's been on my wish list for a while," Neill confesses. "I've been waiting for the right thing to come up. It's strategic."

Making Two Paddocks one of the only producers with a presence in all three of the region's grand valleys is a power play of sorts. "The question is, how does it fit in the jigsaw? There are a million other questions and we don't want to overbalance things," Neill says.

It will be a terrific riddle to solve. Neill's two existing single-vineyard wines come from very marginal sites, and they have been refined over the years to make distinctively



A PINOT PORTFOLIO
Sam Neill has expanded his holdings of pinot noir vineyards in Central Otago.

