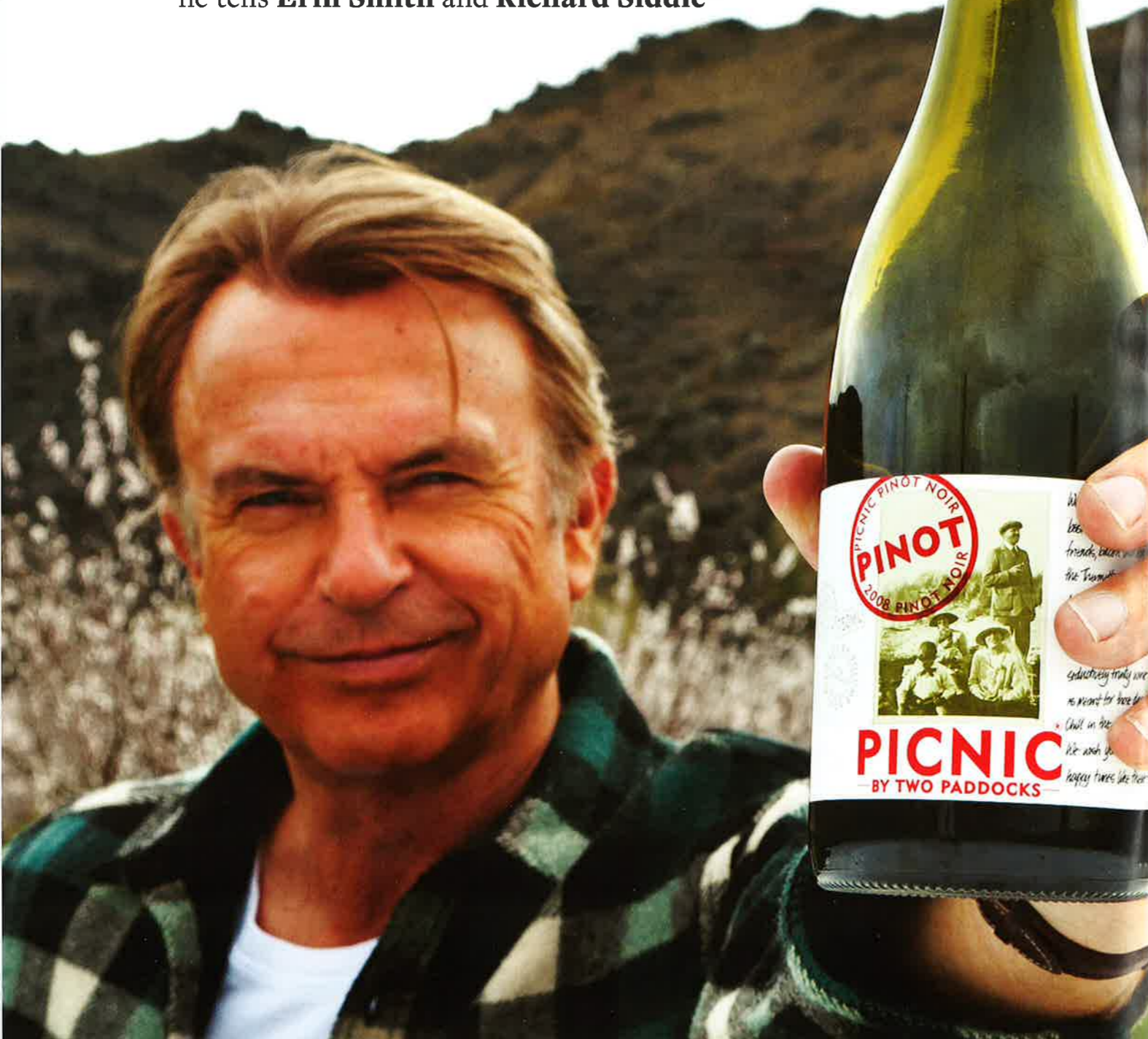


PLAY IT AGAIN, Sam

Sam Neill is as serious and excited about his Two Paddocks winery in New Zealand as he is about his latest acting role, he tells **Erin Smith** and **Richard Siddle**



Sam Neill's Two Paddocks range of wines are being distributed to the main independent and on-trade channels in a new arrangement with Negotiants UK. Haynes, Hanson & Clark will continue to look after existing customers, private clients and selected restaurants.

The wines include Two Paddocks Picnic and Two Paddocks, both available as Riesling or Pinot Noir. There are also two super-premium wines – the First Paddocks Pinot Noir and Last Chance Pinot Noir – which are only produced during very good vintages.



How would you describe your approach to winemaking?
We are serious about the wine we make, but we refuse to be serious. There is so much bollocks and pretentiousness associated with wine – and it needs to stop.

I was at a wine dinner in the Far East where two other winemakers got up to speak. I just wished I had a revolver. I would have shot both of them. They were talking about clones and percentages of who knows what. You could see the whole room start to glaze over.

What does wine mean to you?
I think wine is about personality and conversation. It's about falling in love and living life to the full. You do have to be rigorously disciplined within the confines of the winery, but it's not an academic thing.

What is infinitely fascinating to me is that you can have all the things in the formula right. You can have the right soil types, the right clones, and the right climate. You can have all the right equipment, address your wines in the accepted way, and be conscientious in the vineyard. And you can still produce crap wine.

There is a ghost in the machine somewhere. I know I sound like some sort of crazed hippy, but I think love has a lot to do with it. You have to love your land, you have to love your vines, and the people you work with have to have love.

Everyone uses the word "passion". I hate that word. I want to shoot the next person who uses it. It's about love. It is about treating the people with whom you work with tenderness and the vines with respect and tenderness as well. Our chemistry is what shows itself in the wine.

Is producing a great wine a similar feeling to being in a great film?
Absolutely. It's even weirder with movies. You think, "Oh this is going to be great!" or "I am not sure about that". And it is much better than you thought it was going to be.

I am just a foot soldier in these things. You look at the credits and about 3,000 names go by. And you are thinking, "Holy crap! What are all those people doing?" But they are all doing something. Their role is critical.

What do you think about the role of terroir?
Terroir is more than soil and climate; it is a very complex thing. Even within our little vineyards,

the terroir changes every 10 metres. There are always little pockets that are going to be fantastic and little pockets that are going to be problematic. It might be to do with the way that the wind funnels or any number of complex things. You have to have some sort of emotional attachment to where you are and that is part of terroir.

How did you start out in the winery?
We have planted all our vineyards. I have never bought a vineyard or anything like that; we have planted them all from scratch. It was based on two things. We looked at the climate stats and all that and we looked at soils. But, more importantly, I had to stand on the spot and think, "I've got a nice feeling about where I am". I have stood in some spots and everything looked right, but I just didn't feel comfortable there.

How involved are you in the New Zealand wine trade?
I am very involved in Central Otago. We are a very particular bunch. I am here to help and I do. We are in a very obscure, tiny corner of the world. These are small producers who make good wines, and if I can help sell them, great. I just do what they want. But I am very involved in the Pinot world and the Central Otago world.

How do you see the development of New Zealand Pinot Noir?
We have been pretty assiduous in getting the word out. We hold a big Pinot tasting every second year. Central Otago Pinots have come a long way.

When I planted Pinot 20 years ago there were only one or two little producers there. One of them was Ralph Mills of Rippon, who is a very old family friend and a mentor to me. I looked at his wines and thought they reminded me of when I lived in London in the early 1980s and was very obsessive about Burgundy. They were reminiscent of Burgundy Pinots.

But who would have imagined that there was a Burgundian-style Pinot right down the road from where I lived? That was really what persuaded me that this was possible and it could be done. It was a very weird coincidence that it was down the road from where I was living.

Tell us about your own style of Pinot Noir?
Our Pinots are mostly estate grown, but occasionally we will augment them with grapes bought from friends. Our Two Paddocks Pinot is entirely estate grown. We produce 3,000 cases of Picnic and between 500 and 800 cases of Two Paddocks. In a good year, and 2010 was a particularly good year, we might take some and do a single vineyard, which typically we only produce 100 cases of. The Last Chance was single vineyard, as was the First Paddock, which was the first vineyard we planted.

How do you look at the UK market?
We have been with Haynes, Hanson & Clark and we will be staying with them. But we are with Negotiants elsewhere in the world, such as the US, Australia and New Zealand. They are an Australia-based company, so it makes sense to widen our audience and work with them in the UK. Negotiants will look after six wines that we are a looking at for independents and the on-trade. →

Critics like Jancis Robinson MW and Tim Atkin MW have also been really supportive.

What is the best vintage you have produced?

Time will tell but I think our 2010 Two Paddocks Pinot Noir is our greatest vintage to date. Everything happened for us. All the planets lined up in our favour. But not just for us, for all of Central Otago.

What gives you the greater satisfaction. Acting or a bottle of your own wine?

A bottle of wine because you can be objective about it. I can see it. I can touch it and taste it. I can't see my own performance. I am just the fool inside a character. They also don't give you a review in the same way: "Sam Neill the villain scores six out of 10, or 89 out of a 100."

Has your wine ever appeared in any of your films?

Yes a film last year called *The Vow*. In fact, it appeared in two scenes.

As an actor how do you feel about hosting wine tastings?

I was in an excellent restaurant called Nougatine in New York recently and we were showing a flight of our 2010 Pinots. I suddenly got the feeling that I wasn't showing the wines but the wines were actually showing themselves. I was just like some sort of strange consort. There they were, out in the world, and I was just tagging along.

Your family has a longstanding history in wine and spirits?

It is my grandfather on the label of our Picnic wines – literally having a picnic. My grandmother is just out of the picture. He was a wine and spirits merchant. We have been in the business for 150 years in New Zealand. I believe that my great-grandfather's father, who was Irish, was a wine and spirits merchant as well. So a minimum 150 years, but I am the first one to make any of it.

Why did you call your flagship wine Last Chance?

First of all, there is a little water course called the Last Chance water scheme running through the vineyards and to which we subscribe. It was dug in 1862 by gold miners. That is the lifeline for the vineyards. It is a very arid, but very beautiful, place. Secondly, we think that is the southern-most vineyard in the world.

We are not terribly high, but we are in the 45th parallel. We are on a ridge that faces sun towards the north and there are four vineyards along that ridge. We are at the foot of the parallel and 2° closer to the Antarctic than anything in Chile or Tasmania or anywhere else.

The area was formed by glaciers. That is the crazy thing about it. For Pinot Noir to be grown successfully it must be in a marginal climate that takes the longest possible time to ripen. So it is immensely challenging and there have been years when we were completely destroyed.

Be it one vineyard or another, and usually in the spring, God can point his finger and bomb one of the vineyards. But then it all goes right and you produce sublime wine. It is the last chance, you



Neill's vineyards in Central Otago are the southern-most vineyards in the world

know: we are living on the edge. On one side is the sublime and on the other, the catastrophic. You can tip either way.

Why did you decide to make Riesling wines?

My wife decided not to drink any more red wine, so I planted Riesling in her honour. Also, Riesling is the other great wine of Central Otago in my view.

I am also a great fan of Rieslings. I love Rieslings from Alsace and South Australia. They are such subtle and rewarding wines.

There were certain mass German brands that called themselves Riesling, which are still available, but I don't even know what they were. But because they have the word Riesling on them, they do the world of Riesling untold damage. We have all had bad nights on them in the past. You thought they were going to be the gateway to heaven and they turned into grizzly failures and awful hangovers.

Two Paddocks is really more my style of Riesling. It is not entirely dry. Our Riesling Picnic is a slightly sweeter style than Two Paddocks Riesling.

It has been very rewarding. Both wines are from the same vineyards – part of my main vineyard, called Red Bank. It is 130 acres and about 20 acres are under grape, five of them under Riesling. We grow other things like saffron and herbs; we also have our own orchards and raise some pigs.

How well are your wines known around the world?

We have a very loyal following in Hong Kong and, increasingly, in Singapore. In Hong Kong it is mostly restaurant business. We have been the house pour at the Four Seasons for five or six years now. I have a great importer there. She is great and super energetic. In both Hong Kong and Singapore there are very wealthy, sophisticated and knowledgeable communities. The level and depth of knowledge of the average punter who comes to some of our events has blown me away. They are incredibly knowledgeable about wine in general and Pinot in particular and they have fantastic palates. There is a lot of enthusiasm there. ①



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