



CHEERS!
Actor and
winemaker Sam
Neill proudly
presents his very
own pinot noir

*One of New Zealand's most famous exports, **Sam Neill** returned to his family's homeland in 1993 to put a stake, literally, in the ground at his Two Paddocks vineyard. The veteran actor shares the fruits of his frustrating, yet ultimately rewarding, labour with Hong Kong Tatler*

A Vintage Career

BY ROBBY NIMMO



LONG WHITE CLOUDS
Neill's vineyard in Gibbston, Central Otago in winter

IHERE'S AN OLD CHINESE PROVERB THAT DECLARES: "A cunning hare has three burrows," and actor Sam Neill is one such hare. Neill, who was christened Nigel John Dermot, was born in one country (Ireland), grew up in another (New Zealand) and then chose a third (Australia) as his home for many years. He now splits his time between his homes in New Zealand's South Island and Sydney.

Born in 1947 in Omagh, County Tyrone in Northern Ireland, Neill is the second son of a Harrow- and Sandhurst-educated army officer, and a third-generation New Zealander. When his father's Irish sortie was over in 1954, the family returned to New Zealand. He could well have grown up to continue the military tradition, or take his place in Neill & Co, the (then) largest liquor retailer in New Zealand.

Instead, he broke the mould and chose *My Brilliant Career* (the title of the first successful film he made in Australia). In one sense, he upheld the family tradition of selling liquor – by deciding to make his own: in 1993, Neill estab-

lished his Two Paddocks wine label.

The vineyard is in New Zealand's South Island at Central Otago, not far from Queenstown, the adventure capital of the Southern Hemisphere where you can experience the one-day adrenalin surge of "the awesome foursome": a helicopter ride through a gorge, jet boating, bungee jumping and white-water rafting.

Of his Irish roots, Neill says, "A fair amount of my genetic material would be Irish, but I'm not Irish. Home for me is somewhere between Otago and Sydney. I am fortunate enough to have three passports."

"When I went back to Omagh in Northern

Ireland for the first time a couple of years ago, it was wonderful to return to the place where I spent the first seven years of my life. I felt inconspicuous there until a woman handed me a cup of coffee in a small restaurant and whispered, 'We're very proud of you around here'. I nearly cried."

The self-effacing streak runs thick in Neill's veins and, indeed, in New Zealand's national psyche. "The New Zealand self-effacing thing is a double-edged sword that can have a downside. It can often go with undervaluing and underselling your own culture and your own worth. And that's a problem. I've got it as bad as any of them."

A surprising revelation from a man who has appeared in some 50 films spanning *Jurassic Park*, *The Hunt for Red October*, *Dead Calm*, *The Dish*, *The Piano* and *The Horse Whisperer*, as he took on the pivotal role in the TV series *Reilly, Ace of Spies*. It is no understatement to say Neill would qualify as the New Zealand resident with the most recognisable face on the planet.

One might think that the self-effacing nature of New Zealanders is what keeps driving them on to new pursuits, when others might rest on their laurels and sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labours.

Neill has been an activist, an environmentalist and has a definite community consciousness. He is a supporter of many charities, but it would seem outside the realm for him to use his fame for ill-gotten gain. He is also happier to talk about other people's films more than his own. "I am currently looking forward to seeing a film called *The Vintner's Luck*, directed by Niki Caro, who also made *Whale Rider*. It is a New Zealand film set in Burgundy that focuses on a winemaker in about 1820."

The best advice he was given as an actor was

Neill's Movie Strip

REILLY: ACE OF SPIES

directed by Jim Goddard and Martin Campbell (1983)



DEAD CALM

directed by Phillip Noyce (1989)

THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER

directed by John McTiernan (1990)

THE PIANO

directed by Jane Campion (1993)



JURASSIC PARK

directed by Steven Spielberg (1993)

from *Ivanhoe* co-star James Mason, whom he describes as "a friend and mentor." The advice fits with the self-effacing New Zealand psyche. "He taught me never, never act. Just be. I think the 'be' thing is important. Just inhabit the role. Don't go showing off. Showing off is bad."

Neill is as laconic and low key as he is driven. His sartorial elegance is also understated. The wardrobe choice for this interview is Neill de rigueur: a simple, well-cut light-coloured linen suit that would look at home beneath a straw boater in one of his films like *My Brilliant Career* or *Sirens*.

There are many New Zealanders who are more laconic than Neill. "When I first started planting my grapes in Gibbston, Central Otago in 1993, there was a local chap who shook his head as if to say my doing so was a total folly. He didn't say anything; just kept shaking his head. He was a wise old man I should have listened to, but was luckily mad enough not to. And actually, I'm glad I ignored him as the vineyard has been such an incredible adventure.

"I know now that he was saying 'You will not make money. You will endure moments of terrible frustration. There will be disappointments and setbacks. Your life will be immensely more complicated as a result of it.' All of this was true and was encapsulated by the sage shake of the head. But I wouldn't have done it any other way, really. I aspire to the day when it supports me, not the other way around."

Perhaps Neill has put a part of his journeys and international influences into his wine. Some might say wine has always been a journey of discovery, or at least since the 1700s. That's when French Benedictine monk Dom Pierre Pérignon shouted, "I'm drinking stars," when he first tasted

LABOUR OF LOVE
CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW
Harvest time; the vineyard manager's house; Neill shows off his Two Paddocks hat





champagne that he'd inadvertently invented.

Neill also experienced a wine epiphany. "It was circa 1980 in London. It was in the days when great burgundy was more affordable and you could buy it in local wine shops. I had a few pounds in my pockets, which was a novel sensation as I'd never had any before. So I bought a bottle of Château de Marsannay.

"That's what got me completely riveted by wine and also by the idea of pinot noir. I thought, 'Why have I been drinking all this other rubbish?' This amazing wine was a revelation to me."

The experience of drinking less and drinking better quality wine may have started at that moment in London, but it became a philosophy that has held true for nearly three decades. It is also one he espouses in the recession, where he feels it has even more meaning. "My comment is that people are still going for quality, and probably drinking a little less."

He cuts a wry smile and says that he is leaner for it. "But jokes aside, in this recession, I believe people will go for quality. But quality covers a lot of bases. There are many great wines in the world. You don't have to confine yourself only to the wines of the great French châteaux. These are wines of certain magnificence, but the prices are ultimately even more magnificent. Every recession brings opportunity, and this one will be good for New World wines. It offers the opportunity to be a little more adventurous and broaden your horizons. There's so much to be discovered in Australia and New Zealand particularly."

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE PHOTOS OF THE vineyard on the blog he updates frequently at www.twopaddocks.com perhaps does more to convince anyone to travel to New Zealand (and sup the wine) than the award-winning work of Tourism New Zealand. (And there's the added the enjoyment of Neill's dry wit in the commentary.) There are photos of Neill with wild salmon and trout fishing in the crystal-clear waters of the area. The mountains in the backdrop seem to stand out in relief, almost as though they are surreal. The sky seems to go on forever. You begin to grasp why Two Paddocks is certified organic.

"Our credo is to be as green as we possibly can be," Neill says. Not only is this wine many would like to drink, it is also the air most of us would prefer to breathe. You can see it crisp as a freshly bitten apple and the visibility knows no bounds. It's as though you can see as far as the end of the world. "A nearby vineyard, Rippon at Wanaka, owned by my late friend, Rolfe Mills, is one of the most famously photographed vineyards in New Zealand."

In terms of its wine success, New Zealand is a very young nation. It was in 1983 that the wine world was first bowled over by a Montana Malborough sauvignon blanc at a tasting in London. In 1986, *Wine Spectator* commented that Cloudy Bay should be the new benchmark for sauvignon blanc worldwide – and US wine critic Robert Parker (of the 100-point wine rating system) didn't go out on a limb for no reason.

Despite the sudden rise to international

I started to talk to people about pinot noir on movie sets and take it to dinner. It was good to see their initial resistance broken down

success of New Zealand sauvignon blanc, Neill's preference is clearly pinot noir. "It was another 10 years before everyone started taking New Zealand pinot noir seriously. I started to talk to people about it on movie sets and take it to dinner. It became a habit. It was good to see their initial resistance broken down."

Winemaking in New Zealand lies between the 35th and 45th parallels, in wine terms, between Morocco and Bordeaux. "Two Paddocks is 45 degrees south. We are the equivalent of the north of Spain." But latitudes that are the same in the north as the south don't equate in the wine world (pun intended). Two Paddocks is situated between the equator and the South Pole and the weather is not always kind.

"Last year, we had a terrible, unseasonal frost in November at the start of the Southern hemisphere summer. It was a dreadful year," says Neill. Despite the challenges, Neill says that he's always thought that Two Paddocks would outlive him. "That's my conviction, really. Besides a great cellar, I hope this is my wine legacy."

The beauty of the Otago area has not passed by the keen eye and captive lens of New Zealand filmmaker Peter Jackson, even if Neill thinks his fellow Kiwi's moviemaking was a bad portent

SIRENS
directed by John Duigan (1993)

THE HORSE WHISPERER
directed by Robert Redford (1998)



THE TUDORS
TV series created by Michael Hirst (2007)
UNDER THE MOUNTAIN
directed by Jonathan King (2009)

TELEPATHY
directed by Lesley Manning (2010)

that did not bode well for his 2001 vintage. "In 2000, we had a devastating wipe-out weather event that hampered our vintage that year."

Tongue in cheek, he continues, "I blame Peter Jackson for it, because they had just started filming *The Lord of the Rings* that very week. They were shooting just down the road from us. It destroyed their sets. And it destroyed most of our crops that year. Our production was already small back then, and we went from something like 1,200 cases to 150 cases. I regard every vintage as my greatest wine achievement. This was a tough one."

Although his moviemaking career has taken him to the far corners of the globe, Neill has yet to lose his wanderlust and is a fairly regular visitor to Asia. In Hong Kong during 2007 he was a judge at the Wines of the Pacific Rim Festival (Winpac). "Tasting 250 types of riesling in a morning is harder work than you'd imagine." He was back in Hong Kong for the Bledisloe Cup rugby match between Australia and New Zealand in November and recently visited Malaysia.

Otago is known for breeding succulent lamb and rugged rugby players. In recent times, it has become synonymous with cool climate New Zealand pinot noir. To celebrate the success of the grape in these parts, there is an annual Otago pinot celebration, which recently drew the likes of wine connoisseur Jancis Robinson and New Zealand Prime Minister John Key.

"I met John Key, who was one of the keynote speakers. He invited me for a cup of coffee. I spent two hours having that coffee. He was off-the-cuff, urbane, incredibly witty, immensely charming and well informed," says Neill. The fact that the prime minister might have thought that he was in even more revered company (and could make exactly the same description in reply) seems lost on Neill.

And this is where the charm lies – not only in the man, but also in his wines. Both are elegantly understated; distinguished, even. Both are more complex than they first seem and have much to offer that's intriguing and enduring.

Years ago, there was an advertising campaign "If Paris were a drink, it would be Grand Marnier." Equally, if New Zealand were a drink, it would be made by Sam Neill. And the world is a better place for it. **T**

CHERRY NOTES
A bottle of 2006 Two Paddocks Pinot Noir



IMAGES: TWO PADDOCKS; REX/FEATURES

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Two Paddocks transport, a fully restored 1947 chevy; the tasting panel retires to the jury room to discuss the wine; Neill takes time out to go fishing