



# A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

From a 50-year career as an actor, to farmer, author and winemaker, Sam Neill likes to keep busy, managing to excel at everything he does.

## SAM NEILL

Actor & Two Paddocks Proprietor

Sir Sam Neill is a quintessential Kiwi. He has a mostly down-to-earth 'let's have a cuppa and talk about it' style, with a straightforward honesty about the world as he sees it. He also has a wicked sense of humour, and a love of four-legged creatures, especially dogs and pigs.

As a fellow Kiwi, I can relate.

Yet he is also a citizen of the world. His upbringing and professional life have seen him live in various parts of the world, often based in different cities for acting assignments. Neill has a very serious side when it comes to his profession and wine business, his family and privacy.

Speaking of privacy, if you've read Neill's book, *Did I Ever Tell You This?*, then you'll know from page 2 that he's been managing a personal health challenge, and if you must know more, then head further in. He's doing well and that's all there is to say about that.

His book is a must-read. It details the journey of his life so far, beginning with memories as a small boy in Ireland, through to his upbringing and early career adventures in New Zealand, and his evolution into acting and world travels.

### KNIGHTHOOD FOR ACTING

His big and small screen roles are how most readers will recognise Neill; that's the side of him we all get to see and enjoy.

He's so good at it that in 2022, he accepted a knighthood for his outstanding contribution to film.

I stopped by Neill's Red Bank property situated in Central Otago, New Zealand so we could chat about one aspect of his life he has a passion for outside of film work ... and that's wine.

I was early, so while I waited, Two Paddocks manager Jacqui Murphy and I had a wander around the property and vines, saying hello to the 'gang of three' ducks that joined us on the walk, all the way up to the pen where we greeted and petted Angelica, Bryan Brown and Annette Bening, three very vocal, hungry and happy-to-see-us pigs.

Back at the clubhouse Neill soon arrived and we started chatting about the property, wine, and the recent harvest seasons. I also tasted through a range of his pinots noir. One of my first questions was about the property – it looked fantastic, full of sweet scents in the air, beautiful autumn leaves falling and vines entering their winter phase. The property is almost one hundred per cent self-sustaining. "From the veggie garden to water, lambs, eggs and solar energy, it would be easy to live off the land for months," he says.

I was curious as to how and when Neill first encountered wine and if there was a 'wine epiphany' that steered him into the genre more seriously. Growing up, Neill's parents always had wine on the table. "We weren't allowed to drink the wine, we were too small. But Dad loved his wine, he'd spent 30 years of his [military] life in Europe, he loved French and Italian wine." Neill explained his epiphany was more an experience. He discovered great wine through a film industry colleague and friend, the late James Mason – the wine was a white burgundy (chardonnay).

"Through the 1970s my palate matured quite quickly and as I began to afford wine, I eventually tried red burgundy (pinot noir), that was the greatest thing," says Neill. He also recalled how his father's friend Rolfe Mills (Rippon Wines) started planting grapes for table wine in North Otago and thought it was fantastic for the region. "Every time we drove up here [from Dunedin] Dad would say this is the perfect place to grow wine; that first generation changed everything."

Neill's own deep dive into the wine business and Two Paddocks story began back in 1993 with the establishment of his

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first vineyard in Gibbston. This was followed by three more sites: Red Bank Farm & Vineyard in Alexandra, The Fusilier Vineyard along Felton Road in Bannockburn, and The Last Chance vineyard on a terrace above the Clutha River in Alexandra. With all sites certified BioGro Organic, the sense of place, the echo of soil and site are apparent in every expression of wine, especially so in the Fusilier wines. Is his palate better today than say, five years ago? "I'm happy to put myself in the mature range, but I think it's definitely more educated, just as you do with life."

Talking about climate change and how this has affected the Two Paddocks vineyards and wines, Neill says: "Oddly enough, not really when it comes to Two

Paddocks. In a meta-sense, though, I'm deeply worried about it. It's not the rising temperatures so much, it's the unpredictable events; we had a decent flood here a couple of years ago, we couldn't get onto the property ... I don't think we'll be planting shiraz anytime soon."

Dean Shaw is the head winemaker for Two Paddocks; he is a master winemaker and master blender. Both he and vineyard manager Mike Wing, and of course, Neill know the vineyards intimately. This is where wine quality originates. Because most Two Paddocks wines are specific blends from site and barrels, I asked Neill how involved he gets with the final style or blend decisions.

"Well, I certainly go around and barrel taste, and I think Dean listens to me ... I like to think I'm a good influencer." Consultant Larry McKenna, a well-known pinot noir specialist, has a guiding influence as well.

### A UNIQUE VINEYARD

'The Last Chance' 2021 Pinot Noir is a special wine indeed, from a historic site. Sam explains it is a site sculpted by millions of years of weather and wind and works on two levels: "We have the most southerly vineyard in the world and this is [our] last chance and place to grow wine before it gets too extreme. The second thing is there's a water race high in the hills dug by miners, you needed water to mine for gold and it was possible to subscribe to the [water] scheme, it was called the 'last chance water scheme' ... it's still called that to this day."

The bouquet and palate of this wine are seamless with a very taut, poised cool climate palate squeeze. The wine is still in its settling stage with powerful textures and myriad flavours, core stony soil flavours tempered by pristine red fruits and excellent structure. I ask whether there is a favourite food match to any of his pinots noir?

"You know, I don't know really ... the magical thing about pinot noir is that it doesn't confine you, and I think that's true, you don't have to have roast beef. I had a great meal at (chef) Josh Emmett's place recently: I had the pasta with broccoli and anchovies, a combination with pinot I would never have thought of ... it was great."

The 'Major General' Pinot Noir 2021 is another exceptional wine, named after Neill's great-grandfather on his mother's side. "It reflects my links to the military. Charles was my mother's grandfather, he was a Quaker – it was unusual for Quakers of that era to become soldiers. He loved entertaining and serving good wine at dinner," he explains.

Neill's acting skills are revered. He is outstanding in his chosen profession, and continues to be. His wines are arguably even more esteemed. **MF**

## LATEST ROLES

At age 76, Neill has starred in over 150 films and television series. He is keen to keep busy, saying retirement from acting "fills me with horror".



### APPLES NEVER FALL

Neill plays a key role as a famous former tennis coach in this TV mini-series. He proved to have some rather good tennis skills in that show and when asked if he had some coaching he replied, "Yes, I got some very good coaching" – with a glint in his eye and one gently raise eyebrow adding, "taking someone's teeth out with a big overhand requires skill."



### THE TWELVE

Neill reprises his role as a lawyer in the second season of *The Twelve*, due for release this year; he is also an executive producer. The first season followed the story of Kate Lawson, who was on trial for the alleged murder of her niece and how the 12 jurors brought their personal lives and prejudices to the courtroom.



### WOOL AMBASSADOR

Neill has joined the Campaign for Wool NZ (CFWNZ) as an ambassador, lending his name and profile to educate and advocate for the super fibre that is NZ strong wool. "I spent a lot of time working in woolsheds as a young fellow. Today, I am a sheep owner and my Suffolk sheep produce strong wool. Every time we shear, I am reminded about what a great product that is."

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