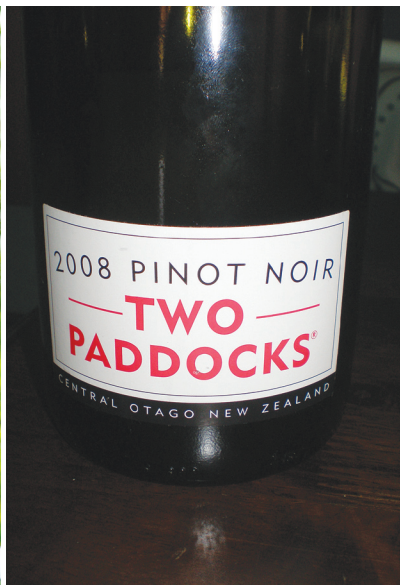


Unmistakably Sam Neill



2008 blended pinot noir



Picnic pinot noir



Two Paddocks on The Datai wine list

# Of vinos and dinos

Above millions of years of fossilised animals and plants that have hardened to form the reddish granite surfaces of Langkawi, Sam Neill matches the island's Jurassic ambience inch for inch with his wines, as **KITTY KAYE** discovers

**T**HE main protagonist in the 1993 hit film *Jurassic Park* carries his 60-something years well — slim, average height, boyish good looks, slightly rugged with a quiet demeanour. All of which Sam Neill has carried through in almost 60 internationally renowned films, including *My Brilliant Career*, *Dead Calm*, *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* and *The Horse Whisperer*. And the one he wrote, starred and co-directed, *Cinema of Unease*, around 16 years ago won Best Documentary in the 1996 TV Guide Film and Television awards.

The question that hangs in the air that evening at The Datai's Pavillion restaurant, which seems to float above Langkawi's Jurassic rainforest, is whether Neill's riesling and pinot noir wines from his Two Paddocks estate in New Zealand will hold well against the somewhat intimidating backdrop, and also, the recommended menu of Thai cuisine.

Quietly apprehensive, Sam himself questions the pairing that Datai's chef, Conny Andersson, has set. "This is a bit of an adventure," he admits with a lucid voice tinged ever so slightly with an American accent. "Because we've never paired our wines with Thai food before."

To distract himself, he glances towards the setting

sun, which is turning the island's sky from fuchsia to inky blue. "We're lurched into the Garden of Eden here," he murmurs as his gaze skims the tree tops vibrating from invisible, active monkeys and hovering eagles above.

Sam's eight-year-old Two Paddocks vineyard started as "a mad adventure" and is located in Central Otago. He claims it strives to produce pinot noir "which at the very least will be enjoyed by family and friends". Although he cheekily admits with a quiet laugh, "My friends will pretty much drink anything, so this didn't seem too hard!"

As it turns out, his small family business is producing a pinot that is world-class — possessing of considerable complexity, velvety texture with a fruity nose and flavour that ends with a memorable and lengthy finish.

Now, besides its Hollywood-famous owner, the intriguing thing about Two Paddocks wines is that they're elusive. Barely enough to be ubiquitous (well, it doesn't help that Sam and his family and mates drink it copiously!), Two Paddocks wines, as Sam says with a laugh, "are available if you look hard enough!"

For now, you'd be guaranteed to find Two Paddocks on The Datai's wine list. And Sam's wines are designed to age for more

than five years.

Pinot noir grape's a finicky, thin-skinned variety and New Zealand has always been renowned for growing unbelievably good ones. Nevertheless, he confesses: "Right now, I'm afraid to call my winemaker who might tell me otherwise (about this year's harvest) because last year it (weather) beat us to the finish line and drove me to my knees."

Lesson in that is; even in the midst of the Jurassic surroundings, good company and potentially vibrant wine and food pairing, a winemaker's worry never waivers and his luck is totally in the hands of Mother Nature.

On that note, let's see what Mother Nature has in store for Sam's wines from 2008 and 2009 vintage, shall we? So, at the risk of sounding cheesy, I say, "Roll camera", it's showtime!

## 2008 Picnic pinot noir

The Picnic range is the entry level from Two Paddocks. Sam's 2008 Picnic pinot noir is made from his best grapes from his Two Paddocks vineyards.

It's light in hue and texture with only a touch of oiliness that clings to the side of the wine glass. On the nose, it's pleasantly butter cake (yes, butter cake although some others may differ) and light, new wood.

While on the palate, it is almost without tannins, young, mocha, with a touch

of friendly tang and lightly tingy on the gums. There's a depth that directs it to be a wine potentially good for ageing.

Now, with Conny's idea of pairing it with lightly tangy prawn, green mango salad, crispy soft shell crab dipped into thai chili oil and pandan chicken, the wine (surprisingly) shines amid the spice, tang and the signature dried shrimp flavours of Thai food.

## 2009 Picnic riesling

However, when his 2009 Picnic riesling pairs with the same foods, there's a marriage of equals that takes place. Both food and wine simply complements, adapting to one another's tang and spice without any complicated battle for attention on my palate. It's especially good with the crispy, deep-fried soft shell crab — the wine shows off its buttery flavour.

The riesling, which is a result of "because my wife announced that she'll never drink red wine again", is a lively vibrant Central Otago regional blend, from Redbank and Gibbston Valley (the other two vineyards that collaborate with Two Paddocks).

On the nose, it's butter, tang, white linen, citrus and terribly inviting. On the palate, its bouquet resonates along with a healthy dose of fresh, crisp and hints of sweetness. It's basically a wine you'll serve at a dinner party with friends you adore. And yes, it'll

age rather elegantly for five years or thereabouts.

## 2006 (magnum) First Paddock, 2007 (magnum) First Paddock and 2008 pinot noir

These are Sam's cream of the crop. The premiums. His pride and joy, so to speak.

The 2008 is made out very rare, handmade, cool-climate pinot from three vineyards, Gibbston, Alexandra, and Redbank at Earnscleugh. While his First Paddock 2007 and 2006 came out of his original vineyard nestled in the heart of the Gibbston Valley.

For the latter two, the grapes stem off low yielding vines which allow the grapes to ripen in the cool climate. Then the wine is handcrafted via traditional methods and aged in small French oak barrels for the duration of its age.

These two have a lush, smooth, oaky base. While one may be a little richer in colour, fragrant, creamier, spicier and fruitier than the other, both are reflections of, I've been told, "distinguished and charming Central Otago pinot noir". Which, after some sips, also showcase an evolved, matured pinot, well-rounded and lush.

Meanwhile, the younger of the trio of pinot grapes from three vineyards holds a lighter crimson hue, owns a cultivated politeness and is more playful. Therefore, it enjoys a cheeky banter with Conny's deep fried garoupa dipped in light chili sauce,

stir-fried ginger chicken and roast duck curry. Its young complexity and tannins hold their own against these opinionated foods.

Just as the 2006 and 2007, much to Sam's (and my) surprise, stand well together with the gentle spicy, fried flavours of the foods that night. "It didn't occur to me to be plausible (the match). But I was told about the warmth of pinot (its lingering heat) that loosens the spices of the foods".

## Final sips

For Sam, the night's pairing unravels his riesling's little secret — Thai flavours show off the wine's lime and apricot flavours. This father of four, the eldest being 36 and the youngest, 20, proudly proclaims, "We're two years away from 20-year-old vines." Which will, inevitably, bear grapes that produce unassuming, approachable, pleasant, wines. Much like Sam himself.

Also, I realise, the wines, just like its owner, seem to adapt to flavours, environment and most of all, moods, really well. Yes, I'd even go as far as to say, quite worthy of several Golden Globe nominations! For both the man and his wines, by the way.

If curiosity is killing you, log onto [www.twopaddocks.com](http://www.twopaddocks.com) to find out more about these elusive wines and how to get your hands on a couple of bottles.