

A VINE romance



A single glass of wine in the '70s led to Sam Neill's "magnificent obsession", writes BEN THOMAS.

He's instantly recognisable as *Jurassic Park's* Dr Alan Grant and pipe-smoking astronomer Cliff Buxton in *The Dish*, but it took a single glass of pinot noir to propel actor Sam Neill to possibly his greatest role: that of The Proprietor, as he calls himself, of the winery in New Zealand's Central Otago, which he planted with the aim of producing a wine to "be enjoyed by my family and friends".

It's certainly his longest-running part in life – he planted the first of his three vineyards himself in 1993 – and probably his hardest.

Like many winemakers and wine lovers, the genesis for Neill's love of wine came from a single glass of wine: a pinot noir. And it wasn't even from New Zealand.

"James Mason ordered a bottle of something called Burgundy in a restaurant near Vevey [Switzerland] in 1979. It was a glass that had a Road to Damascus effect on me, and that is why I toil in those fields today," he says.

There are plenty of celebrities that have put their names to wines – Greg Norman and AC/DC spring to mind – but not many put their heart and soul into it as Neill does.

"Acting has nothing at all to do with winemaking. But in my case, it did fund those vineyards," Neill says.

"I have also had a long, and very satisfactory, affair with wine – one that I indulge every day."

A love of the land and "a profound love affair I have had for most of my life with the particular landscape of Central Otago" led Neill to the Gibbston Valley, a few kilometres outside the South Island ski paradise of Queenstown and a four-hour drive from Dunedin, where Neill, the son of an army officer, grew up from the age of eight.

Neill's New Zealand-born father was an officer with the Royal Irish Fusiliers and decided to retire to civilian life in New Zealand.

"He then joined the family firm of Neill & Co, who were merchants – mainly importers and distributors of wines and spirits. So along with [the current winery] Two Paddocks, we have been plying wine there for many, many years."

With a history of wine in his blood and a love of pinot noir, it seems almost inevitable that Neill would one day find his way into the industry.

First came a Central Otago home – he also has houses in Sydney and Los Angeles – then the vines, but it was a matter of finding the right site in what was, in the early '90s, merely an area of unknown possibility.

Central Otago was better known then for jet boats and bungy jumping rather than world-class pinot noir.

"And when we planted, it was already becoming apparent from a handful of producers there – notably

Rippon and Gibbston Valley – that my favourite wine, pinot noir, could be great there.

"We carefully selected three sites: planted, nurtured, grew ... all from scratch. Like many of the best things in life, it was slow.

"But it was never a hobby. A hobby is something people do in their garages; [It was] more of a magnificent obsession."

That magnificent obsession turned to commercial reality 14 years ago when "my wife and I pulled out the cork from our very first bottle of Two Paddocks Pinot, a 1997, and sniffed, swirled, and tasted.

"Then we looked at each other in mute astonishment – it was surprisingly good. Now we expect nothing less than great, and there is no question the wines are becoming increasingly distinguished.

"Now our original vines are nearly 20 years old. That's a magic number for wine producers."

Since Two Paddocks started, initially as a collaboration with director Roger Donaldson when they both bought adjoining sites in the Gibbston Valley, it's been a steep learning curve for Neill but, just like making a film or on stage, collaboration is the key to good performance.

"I have always had exceptional people with me who have helped me up that slope.

"We normally have about six people on staff, and they stay around for years. It's important to have people who love the job and love your little enterprise and love growing wine. And we sort of love them, without actually saying it.

"My winemaker, Dean Shaw, has been making our wine since 1999.

"And my vineyard manager, Mike Wing, has been with me for seven years and is deeply committed to all things that result in healthy soils and healthy wines.

"This has meant I never needed to pass exams at Roseworthy [the famed wine college of South Australia]."

Neill may have built up a dedicated team, but he's certainly no hands-off boss. When he's not acting, Neill spends all his time in the vineyards, picking or pruning, or in the winery, where he's often seen pouring glasses at the cellar door.

An unpredictable schedule means that Neill isn't always around at the times he would like to – the rush of the harvest, putting together the blends that become the final wine or the whirl of the bottling line – but "when I'm home, I'm there all the time. I converted a seed shed into a flat, and it's a great hideaway," he says.

"Of course, I like to be home for vintage, but it doesn't always happen.



Dual roles: Actor and wine grower Sam Neill at his Alex Paddocks property near Alexandra in the Central Otago region of New Zealand. (ROSS LAND / GETTY IMAGES)

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"The boys have just finished pruning, and I have just started filming in Canada, a happy coincidence as pruning is a job that I'd prefer to miss. My schedule for my day job is always unpredictable.

"One reason I love it, in fact. But it does mean I never know when I will be there."

There is a less-serious side to Sam Neill, the wine man, and that's The Proprietor, a presence Neill has created online in blog and video, along with social media.

"The only hobby aspect of all this, I suppose, is the Two Paddocks website, and I put a lot of energy into that," he says.

"We make little movies and so on, and none of it is very serious at all.

"There is much pompous bollocks in the world of wine, and we refer to me on the blog as The Proprietor, who is me, but is also a kind of pompous, semi-fictional character.

"The Proprietor also runs the Two Paddocks Facebook and Twitter. It's pretty demanding, but we have a lot of fun with it.

"I wouldn't do any of this if it wasn't amusing. And when you think about it, that is what wine is for – a very profound amusement."

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(SUPPLIED / COURTESY TWO PADDOCKS)

Sam Neill on pinot noir and Central Otago

He's hands-on in the winery, and Sam Neill can talk the talk, too. He explains why Central Otago is such a fine source of pinot noir.

"One of the things about making pinot is that you should grow it in marginal areas, so that the grapes ripen as slowly as possible – too much heat and the grapes ripen too fast and never develop all those gorgeous pinot flavours we crave.

"But this also means that you will be in an area that will be not just cool but, on occasion, too damn cold.

"Frost is our great enemy, so I branched out from Gibbston to two further sites in Earnscleugh (Clyde and Alexandra) so that if one got nailed, the chances were that we'd be fine elsewhere.

"Now we are increasingly interested in the different characteristics that these subregions are beginning to show and, while Gibbston is already famous, the Earnscleugh wines are now gaining an enthusiastic following – they are voluptuous, feminine and subtle.

"In addition to that, the selection of pinots from our three sites in our Two Paddocks means wines of complexity and depth."

GIBBSTON \ CENTRAL OTAGO

