

# Kings of the wild frontier

A rock star and an actor are among the many creative types who are making their mark as vigneron

## ✱ Wine takes all types. From the simple

European grape grower following in the footsteps of countless generations to the wealthy landowner, the path of the vigneron has over the centuries attracted its fair share of diverse devotees, with the arts and show business having recently proven to be particularly fertile ground for the aspiring winemaker.

The winery or a vineyard has become for some a de rigueur life accessory — another place for creative energy to thrust. The likes of Drew Barrymore, Antonio Banderas, Gerard Depardieu, Dan Aykroyd (and he's got a vodka too) have all tried their hand at the winemaking game with varying levels of success.

Some such as AC/DC simply attach their name to a wine and reap the rewards — the wines showing the kind of integrity and character one would expect. Others, such as Sting and Frances Ford Coppola, appear more engaged in their wine's creation and its sale to a grateful audience. Inevitably, though, as for all vigneron, the contents of these wines reflect not only the region from where their grapes have been drawn but also the hand of the winemaker and proprietor. And nowhere is this starker than in recent wine releases from actor Sam Neill and American hard rocker Maynard James Keenan.

Keenan is known more as the sometimes mohawked or even shaven-headed front man of the band Tool and more recently Puscifer than for his Merkin Vineyards wines. He hasn't come to wine through some longstanding family love for wine, although his great-grandfather made wines in northern Italy. He found it through endless hours on a music tour bus, which occasionally would snake through wine country, dotted with vines. Slowly his interest in vines and wines grew. "Grape vines are so much more evolved, so much more complex and have so much more history than other fruits ... which on some level is probably why we respond to it and embrace it." And embrace it he has, planting vineyards in the starkly beautiful yet harsh, arid high-desert country of Arizona, not a place known for the production of wine, where cacti are far more prevalent than vines.

Part of his journey into wine reflects the progression of his musical career. He has chosen not to mix it with the established brands in the moneyed world of Sonoma or Napa Valleys in California, where his name could have quickly turned a buck, but to head off the beaten track to a new frontier. The evolution of wine from a simple drink has occurred only with the breaking of frontiers, which took the vine from its home in the Caucasus region and spread it around the world, including to Australia and the US.

As for all frontier men, there have been sacrifices and setbacks — with whole vineyards grubbed up not long after planting. Winter frosts have taken their toll, killing hundreds of vines. The area is also exposed to some unique viticultural hazards — raccoons, skunks, gophers and even wild boars have been known to rip



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netting and strip a vineyard in a single night. However, the sites possess some interesting ancient riverbed soils full of large pebbles, somewhat similar to those found in the hot region of Chateaufneuf du Pape in southern France, which was Keenan's inspiration. With sustainability high in the minds of its owners, this is not just some short-term flight of fancy into the world of wine but a serious attempt to make the genuine article, even if from an unlikely and desolate place.

Sam Neill's wine story, by contrast, is almost traditional. Born into a family that was one of the largest importers of wine and spirits in New Zealand, he entered the wine business because of a love of Central Otago, where he had holidayed as a child, and its apparent ability to produce great pinot noir — Neill's favoured tippie. At the core of these wines is the Sam Neill persona. They are not simple nor forced and just a little quirky, yet with a generosity, complexity and old-world charm that never fail to impress.

Like Keenan, Neill is also a frontier man growing much of his fruit in the most southerly part of Central Otago — Alexandra, which is also the most southerly wine region in the world. Both men are helping to expand the world of wine, each in their own special way.

### Two Paddocks Picnic Pinot Noir 2010

The Picnic is Sam Neill's wine for relatively early drinking, although will easily drink well over the next five years. Fruit forward with vibrant red cherry and raspberry on a fleshy, vibrant palate it is an easy drinking, lifted varietal style with attractive length.

### Two Paddocks Pinot Noir 2009

A serious pinot noir that showcases the more savoury style of Alexandra pinot noir over the more traditional fuller, sweeter Otago style — tremendously pure with restrained and elegant fruits of wild strawberry, herb, earth and spice. Streamlined in the mouth with drying silky tannins, it is a wine that will flower over the next eight years.

### Arizona Stronghold Mangus 2011

Arizona Stronghold wines live up to their name, being firm, masculine wines although in a more savoury rustic style than might be found in South Australia. The Mangus is a bold dry red sangiovese/cabernet blend with a little malbec, petite syrah and merlot thrown in; earthy, dark cherry fruit has hints of thyme, baked earth and black pepper. Best enjoyed over the next three to five years. 