

Interview

The wine obsessive

Sam Neill may be best known for his films, but his heart lies in New Zealand, as he tells Arabella Youens

ACTOR Sam Neill was born in Northern Ireland to a New Zealand father, who was serving with the Irish Guards, and an English mother. The family moved to New Zealand when Sam was seven. He is best known for starring roles in *Jurassic Park*, *The Hunt for Red October* and *The Piano*. When not filming or directing, he lives at his winery, Two Paddocks, Central Otago, on New Zealand's South Island

What prompted you to set up your vineyards? It all began modestly—a few acres, nearly 20 years ago. Then it got out of hand; now, it's three separate vineyards. The main one, Redbank, is about 130 acres and includes orchards (cherries, apricots, nectarines), lavender, which we distil into oil, an organic vegetable garden, a field of saffron, 40-odd attractive black-faced sheep, a field of truffinated oak trees, seven annoying pigs—they root—and two feral delinquent goats. And so on. But wine is the core, and it's been very satisfying to start from scratch—planting vines that produce heavenly wines year after year. I say heavenly with confidence, as I drink quite a bit of what we produce. Well, someone has to be on quality control!

Where do you live on the vineyard?

I converted an old corrugated seed shed into a flat for when we're down there. It's pretty humble: no television, and mobile phones don't work there, so it's bliss. However, I have treated myself to an actual record player for the sitting room, and have dug out my old vinyl. There have been unconfirmed sightings of the proprietor on air guitar as a result.

What has been your greatest challenge there?

I'd like to pretend I run the show with flair and vision, but I'd be fibbing. I have a competent chap called Mike who manages things. He's one of those annoying people who can do sensible things such as fix tractors. Practicality is not a gene I inherited, sadly. My father was the same—how he fought the Wehrmacht for three years can only be explained by his having been assisted by lots of men like Mike.

Miz Watanabe



Where else do you call home?

Central Otago is home for me—we always went there on holiday when I was growing up, so it still has the sense of enchantment for me that it had when I was 10. But there are other places where I feel very much at home. Ireland, of course, as I spent my first seven years there (either that or there's something in my DNA that feels comforted when I smell a turf fire). The same goes for much of the UK—my mother's family was from Herefordshire, which I love. But my beloved Granny lived in Tenby, which has hardly changed since the 1950s, and I'm almost overcome with tearful nostalgia when I go back there.

What do you do to relax at the vineyard?

Everything there is relaxing for me, but what I love more than anything is planting things, in particular, trees. Then I wander about them and take great satisfaction from their growth. I feel like a Lilliputian Capability Brown; I do admire and emulate those who plant knowing they will never see the full fruits of their labour in their lifetime.

Any favourite local haunts?

It's 10 miles to the nearest coffee, so it's the staff room for a cup of tea, I'm afraid. Or possibly a glass of wine at the end of the

day. It's better there in winter—our farm manager Bob wears shorts in the summer, and his legs aren't at all appealing.

Do you stay with your family in the UK?

I have two lovely daughters who live in London. They have boyfriends. The last thing they would want would be Dad to stay. And the last thing I would want would be to stay in their horrible flats. So it works out well all round.

Is there anything you miss about the UK?

So many things—where to start? My friends, black cabs, tailors, native oysters, Soho, the National Gallery, the National Theatre, steamed pudding at Scott's, good actors, broadsheet papers, gossip, Georgian buildings, and more.

What's the most surprising place you've spotted a bottle of Two Paddocks on the wine list?

I'm always astonished when I look at a list and Two Paddocks Pinot is not on it. All right, I was in the heart of China recently, and I know it might be tricky to get it there, but, really, anywhere else one feels... deprived! 🐦

Two Paddocks is distributed in the UK by Haynes Hanson & Clark, 7, Elystan Street, London SW3 or Sheep Street, Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire (london@hhand.co.uk)