



SIDEWAYS ON THE SOUTH ISLAND

The serenity of New Zealand's Central Otago region might be worlds apart from the glitz and shine of Hollywood. But, for celebrated actor Sam Neill, it's the perfect terroir in which to indulge two of his great passions – Pinot Noir and winemaking, says **Diana Khoo**.

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ABOVE Actor and wine aficionado Sam Neill at Alex Paddocks.

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At a latitude of 45° south, New Zealand's wine-producing region of Central Otago is quite possibly the most southerly one in the world. Surrounded by beautiful, craggy mountain peaks and sitting geologically atop glacial valley floors, it is known for its hot, dry summers and cold, snowy winters. It also seems to be a world apart from what Sam Neill is experiencing right now. Dressed in a loud, printed shirt and sporting Ray-Bans, we're sitting in the lounge of The Datai, a luxurious resort on Malaysia's mystical Langkawi Island, hidden amidst lush, age-old rainforest and facing the Andaman Sea. The air is thick with humidity and the stillness of the afternoon heat is broken only by the loud drone of cicadas as well as the occasional chatter of the oriental pied hornbills that thrive in the area. For those who know Neill as Dr Alan Grant, the palaeontologist in the *Jurassic Park* movies, it would seem he is in his element. It is, in fact, his first visit to Malaysia, where he recently hosted a special Two Paddocks wine dinner at the resort. "I can't begin to tell you how beautiful this all is...I feel like I've been lurching into some kind of Garden of Eden."

"It's a world-first, actually," chips in Curtis Marsh, an independent food and wine writer who is also known as 'The Wandering Palate'. "This is the first time Two Paddocks is doing a tasting almost in the jungle and I think the only reason Sam agreed to it was that the surroundings remind him of *Jurassic Park*," he wisecracks. For those familiar with The Datai's charms, it's safe to say there were no fearsome beasts in sight. The only possible animal-related incident that could have occurred would be if a passing monkey happened to take a fancy to one's wine glass. Held at the resort's highly-regarded Thai dining room, The Pavilion, around 50 privileged guests were treated to a special menu, which featured Chef Conny Andersson and team's cuisine paired with delicious Two Paddocks Pinot Noirs and the star wattage of Neill himself, wittily going through each wine as the evening progressed. He had, in fact, won the crowd over

when he started off by saying: "I read that Pinot Noir is the wine of choice for the intelligent drinker so it's really nice to be having dinner with all you high IQ people."

Born in Omagh in Northern Ireland's County Tyrone, Neill actually has wines and spirits in his blood, being the second son of Dermot Neill, a former Irish fusilier and third-generation New Zealander whose family owned Neill & Co, then New Zealand's largest liquor retailer. "We used to sell loads of Beehive, New Zealand's best-selling brandy at the time," he remarks. "It wasn't very good but it did well as the locals could pronounce it easily." His growing up days revolved around Dunedin, the South Island's second-largest town which Neill describes as being "very Scottish and rain-sodden. My family have lived there since 1861 and, although it was rather grim, you'd just need to venture a little further inland to come to a wonderful place where I used to holiday as a child. It's a magical part of the world and I always remember thinking how I'd like to live there one day as it was infused with memories of picnics, camping, catching trout and getting sunburnt – all the marvellous things associated with growing up."

It would certainly seem then that Neill has recreated his youthful vision of Utopia with Two Paddocks. Located "in the middle of nowhere", the winery is about an hour's drive from Queenstown in New Zealand's Central Otago region and is where Neill lives for three to four months a year. "We're miles off the road from anywhere and only those who really know our wines or want to see what we do manage to find us. Our tasting room welcomes around 40 to 50 visitors each week but we certainly don't get any tyre-kickers," says the 64-year-old with a wry smile. Listening to Neill describe the property, it sounds positively idyllic. He has planted 10 acres of oak trees ("I felt bad as I'd cut some down for barrels"), which he has 'truffle'ated' in the hopes of obtaining some edible black diamonds, and Two Paddocks is also home

to a charming menagerie of animals, including black-faced sheep, chickens and an unruly pet pig. "His name is Angelica," laughs Neill, "as he was a little girl's pet. He was small and cute but can now easily play rugby for New Zealand. He's a nice pig but very naughty and certainly not to be trusted as he's recently taken the gate off his hinges in order to get at some pears. I was outraged!" Neill also shares how Two Paddocks used to have a herd of South African Boer goats, which have since been liberated as "they were a real menace – stropky and always jumping the fences and eating the grapes. We are, however, getting a cow soon."

Oaks and grapevines aside, Two Paddocks also grows saffron and lavender, and also boasts fruit orchards and vegetable patches. "We have a chap who helps harvest the gardens. We also pick what we need for cooking or friends just come round and help themselves," he says. The vineyards are lovely, particularly Alex Paddocks, which sit above the Clutha River. The surrounding area is equally stunning, with ice blue lakes and old mountain trails that lead to historic gold mines. On the fact that his preferred terroir is a match made in heaven for the picky Pinot Noir, a thin-skinned, difficult varietal most winegrowers christen as the 'heartbreak grape', Neill cites it as "positively serendipitous. If I lived in an area where, say, Malbec thrived, I probably wouldn't have dabbled in winemaking."

It was on two formative occasions that the Pinot bug really bit Neill hard. The first, when he visited his friend, the notable British actor James Mason, who opened a bottle of Burgundy. "I used to drink stuff from cardboard boxes and, when I tasted this particular bottle, it was absolutely marvellous. I asked him what it was and James simply said, 'Burgundy.'" The second instance was when Neill tried a bottle of Rippon Pinot Noir – a winery founded by the late, great Rolfe Mills and based in the same region as Two Paddocks. "Pinot became my favourite grape from then on and those two bottles led to where I am today – planting grapes in Central Otago."

The Central Otago region remains well-known all over the world as being one of the most conducive for planting Pinot. Having begun in 1993 with just five acres at Gibbston, Neill now has around 76 acres of Pinot Noir planted over three main vineyards – the aforementioned Alex Paddocks, Redbank Paddocks and First Paddock, his first and smallest vineyard. Now, although production hovers around the 5,000 case-mark, Two Paddocks remains small by industry standards.

Not that it bothers Neill. When asked if he'd be keen on adding the letters 'MvV' (Master of Wine) after his name, he vehemently says: "No. It's too time-consuming and I'm happy to leave that to the Masters." He is also not the least interested in accolades or awards although "I love getting a good review or letters that tell me someone had a wonderful experience with my wines." With a simple, straightforward approach to his wines, it hardly comes as a surprise that his wines bear names that say likewise. His choice of the name 'Picnic' for his entry level wine (although Neill bristles at that description, preferring to refer to it as his 'everyday' wine, "as I drink it every day if I can") is equally telling, describing it "as humble a name as you can give a wine. Also," he muses, "Two Paddocks, Picnic, Pinot Noir...they all have a nice 'P' ring about them."

Fourteen vintages on and barring certain exceptions like during the year 2000 when torrential rains ruined most of the crop ("It was the same year Peter Jackson's *Lord*



LEFT Some of the wines served during dinner at The Datai.
BELOW Vines amidst ancient granite outcrops and wild thyme.



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of the Rings set got washed away by floods," he murmurs) and, in 2009, when a massive frost dumped itself on Neill's vines at the critical time of flowering, the highs have certainly outweighed the lows. "Thankfully, there have been some great vintages, particularly 2001, 2003, 2006 and 2007 – my favourites," says Neill. "But it's hard to tell what Pinot can do or how it can develop. 2000, for example, turned out to be the most eccentric vintage ever, with a very interesting fruitcake dimension to it. I liken it to be a big Italian soprano singing topless. I can't think of any other way to describe it but am absolutely delighted with it."

Listening to Neill talk about Pinot Noir brings to mind the 2004 comedy-drama *Sideways*, adapted from Rex Pickett's novel of the same name, which extolled the virtues of the Pinot grape. I gingerly mention it must have helped his cause a little, to which Neill smiles and says: "I love *Sideways* and have friends who acted in it. In fact, one shows his bare bum in the movie. But what I really loved about it was that it wasn't all about wine but just a really good movie."

Which also brings us to the topic of what a Hollywood star is doing making wine. "Yes, I

know, actors have had a long and dishonourable history associated with wine. The name Peter O'Toole comes to mind," jokes Neill, cheekily alluding to the celebrated actor, whose legendary boozing will forever associate him with the quote: 'Drinking problem? Why no, drinking is the easiest thing in the world.' "I can see why people get annoyed when actors do things other than acting, case in point, Ronald Reagan," he laughs. "But there's something about the craftsmanship that goes into each bottle; the terroir; and how making wine in an area like Central Otago, where life is lived on the very edge of viability, can transform a grape as fickle and difficult as Pinot Noir into something so beautiful." While that sounds absolutely poetic and spoken from the heart, Sam Neill remains realistic about which day job to keep. "I like this joke where one asks how to make a small fortune from winemaking. The answer? Start with a big fortune," he wisecracks. "But winemaking, for me anyway, is not a very economic business. It's just fun and very satisfying. Oh, and it gets me pissed once in a while." ■