

Taste

Food, wine and the hot gourmet destinations.

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Sam Neill at Two Paddocks, Otago, New Zealand

A magnificent OBSESSION

Movie star Sam Neill has another life far from the Hollywood red carpet – his off-screen passion is his quirky, award-winning Two Paddocks vineyard in New Zealand's South Island.

WORDS **SUSAN CHENERY**

THE POPLAR TREES along the river are tinged with red in the last days of the lingering Otago summer. Across the sweep of the Gibbston Valley are all the yellow and orange shades of early autumn; flashes of purple from lavender gardens; the febrile landscape becoming wilder as it climbs to the mountains of the Southern Alps. Away in the far distance are the deep, icy lakes and wild, rocky terrain of New Zealand's deep southern land.

On such a shining day in the hills of the high country, Sam Neill stands on a rock surveying his radiant domain. The pinot noir vines of his Two Paddocks vineyard run down the hill and out across the valley.

"A lot of our vines are now coming into 20 years old and that is supposed to be a bit of a magic number," he says, tenderly taking the tiny grapes into his hand. "Every vineyard is different from ▶"

PHOTOGRAPHY: GRAHAME SYDNEY



year to year and that is what is so magic and mystical. These fields are just covered in thyme, it grows between the rows. We think that accounts for some of the savoury notes that you will find in Two Paddocks wine.”

We rumble around the property in Neill’s wheezing 1947 Chevy truck. Bouncing on the back is his charming 22-year-old daughter Elena, briefly back from London, and his Staffordshire terrier, Zappa, rescued near Windsor, New South Wales.

“He was in the pound. At one point he was 24 hours from death row. When he is naughty we say it is back to death row,” Neill laughs.

SLIGHTLY DISHEVELLED and crumpled, with greying stubble, this is a Sam Neill far from the cameras and glamour of his acting career – the career that has thrown up *Jurassic Park*, *The Piano* and *Dead Calm*. This is his other life. Here, he is by his own definition, “a cross between dirt farmer, vigneron, landed gentry and hippie”. Pinot is his passion, although he deplores the overuse of this phrase. “In my view, passion is a term that should be reserved for the sort of heightened emotional state that can result in the discarding of trousers. You may lose your shirt producing pinot noir, but you are unlikely to lose your trousers,” he recently joked. He prefers the term “magnificent obsession”.

Born in Northern Ireland, where his father was stationed with the Irish Guards, Neill comes from a long line of liquor purveyors, Neill and Co, New Zealand’s largest liquor retailers. “Coming up here on

holidays, my father would say someone is going to grow grapes here one day. And amazingly, 40 years later, it was me. It was later in life that I started getting interested in wine properly, rather than just something to chug on, the way you do when you are a young fellow.”

It all started in 1993 as “a bit of a diversion” on 2ha bought in Central Otago. “I just wanted to make wine to drink at home with my friends. To put my own wine on the table was my dream.”

He knew that planting in a valley where the temperature can lurch from 23 to minus three degrees Celsius could be a “heartbreaker”. Three years after he planted his first vines, he and his wife, Hollywood make-up artist Noriko Watanabe, nervously tried their first bottle. “It was ’97. It was the first bottle and we really weren’t expecting anything, so it was a sort of surprise. We were astonished, we were saying this is pretty good. We wanted to make good wine, but didn’t think we would make good wine right away. We were actually incredibly excited.”

And so a consummate winemaker was born. “None of it was really planned. It just sort of got out of hand, really. I started to get ambitious. And once you start getting ambitious, there is really no knowing where it will end.”

Last year, Neill got an idea of where it was all heading when Two Paddocks 2010 Pinot Noir won the Gold [Outstanding] at the prestigious International Wine and Spirits Competition in London.

“We blush as modestly as we can,” he said on his Two Paddocks blog, clearly thrilled. Among other superlatives, the judges said: ➤



WINE TASTE

Deep purple: lavender in bloom; pinot noir grapes (right)



“Nose is a bouquet of floral aromas, violet and rose, changing into dried herb and bergamot, before turning dark and smoky”.

Over the years, Neill has built his dream into a reality, bringing home the best of European and antipodean culture as experienced by a discerning man of the world. In 1997 and 2000, he bought two more parcels of land, bringing his vineyards to 57ha, producing both pinot noir and riesling. “It is a long, intricate and fascinating process getting to know your own land and what it requires. We had to concentrate on getting healthy soil. We are in it for the long haul.” The sleek clean lines of the corrugated iron buildings are “heavily influenced” by Australian architect Glenn Murcutt. The manager’s house “works around the sun, so it gets maximum penetration in the winter and none in the summer. It is a very, very good building.”

Neill has planted rows of cypress trees, reminiscent of Italy. “I am crazy about cypress trees, you just fall in love with them. I get a thrill every time I come back and see how well they are doing.”

Part of this property was an old research farm for lavender and saffron. Then he bought the commercial orchard next door, which grows nectarines, apricots, cherries, “loquats, plums and all kinds of strange fruit”, which he picks and offers to visitors. It seems like a rich man’s fantasy. Yet, Neill says, “I have never actually trousered a 10-bob note from it. Everything we make gets ploughed back into it. The wine is very expensive to make. It is very hard to work out

whether the economics of this thing actually work and I have got absolutely no head for business. So it is by guess or by God, really.”

Although he is serious about both his acting and his winemaking, Neill’s droll sense of humour is everywhere here. The chooks, guinea fowl and assorted feathered friends are all named after famous singers and actors. Meryl Streep, Michael Caine, Beyoncé, Benedict Cumberbatch and their ilk are all pecking away at the ground. There’s a rescued pig, Angelica, and a large black cow called Lady Shakira Caine, who keeps having phantom pregnancies.

We know all this because the activities of “the bestiary” are documented in his whimsically satirical blog, which he writes while sitting around on film sets, and his website (twopaddocks.com) in which he also inveigles his famous (and not-so-famous) friends to select their 10 favourite songs. Explaining why they are favourites and recalling the memories the songs have conjured can be telling. “Your favourite music may not be the best music you have ever heard, but it could be associated with something like how you met your partner, or my days in London in the swinging ’80s; there are these associations that people treasure.”

His staff performs in a ramshackle way in the comedic short films he makes about life on the farm, and in his signature nativity film at Christmas. “I make a rule that if it is not fun, then it is not worth doing. When I started my blog, I rapidly came to the conclusion that everything that went into it had to be at the very least amusing.”

As I leave clutching a box of wine – Two Paddocks Pinot and Riesling, Picnic Pinot Noir and Riesling – he hands me a tiny bottle of lavender oil. “A couple of drops on your pillow at night and you sleep like a baby. This is extremely concentrated and intense. It is 28 different English and French varieties. I am told a lot of lavender producers cut their oil with almond oil, ours is 100 per cent pure.”

I will always remember Sam Neill standing on his mountain, with his recalcitrant animals, his smooth wine, the deep satisfaction of it all. But, he says, “I do like to go away to work”. After all, how else is he going to pay for all this perfection?

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