

Sam Neill & Two Paddocks

A world-famous actor he may be, but Sam Neill is not to be dismissed as just another celebrity winemaker, given his dedication to 'Lord Pinot', and the quality of his wines from Central Otago on New Zealand's South Island

STORY SUSY ATKINS

It's ironic that when I go to interview actor and wine producer Sam Neill at his Central Otago farm, HQ for his Two Paddocks wines, he isn't there. Because as well as being famous for his roles in, among others, *The Piano* and the *Jurassic Park* franchise, and TV's *Peaky Blinders*, Neill has a reputation as the most hands-on of celebrity winemakers; when he's not travelling for work, he lives at the farm, where he's known affectionately as 'The Proprietor' or simply 'The Prop'.

He built a house there, in among the vines, and it's very much his base, to the extent that when he received a devastating blood cancer diagnosis two years ago, he told the specialist (in Australia) 'that I wouldn't come back for a few days, that I hadn't been to my farm for months and I needed to sleep in my own bed... plant something, be a farmer and a wine producer, even if it was only for a few days. I really needed to do that.'

He wrote this in his engaging memoir *Did I Ever Tell You This?* (paperback, £10.99 Penguin, March 2024), penned during treatment that has proved largely successful – he's now in full metabolic remission, though still taking preventative drugs. The book devotes two full chapters to his life in wine and the pages might as well have red wine splashes all over them, so clear is Neill's love for the subject, and for Pinot Noir in particular.

I didn't meet Neill that day; he had been called abroad hurriedly due to a changed film schedule. But I spent an afternoon with his close teammates, winemaker Dean Shaw (who has worked with Two Paddocks since 1999) and viticulturist Mike Wing (joined in 2004). And a full tasting of Two Paddocks' releases later, I got to scratch the bristly head of Neill's beloved kunekune pig Angelica, which is actually a boar, so that was some compensation.

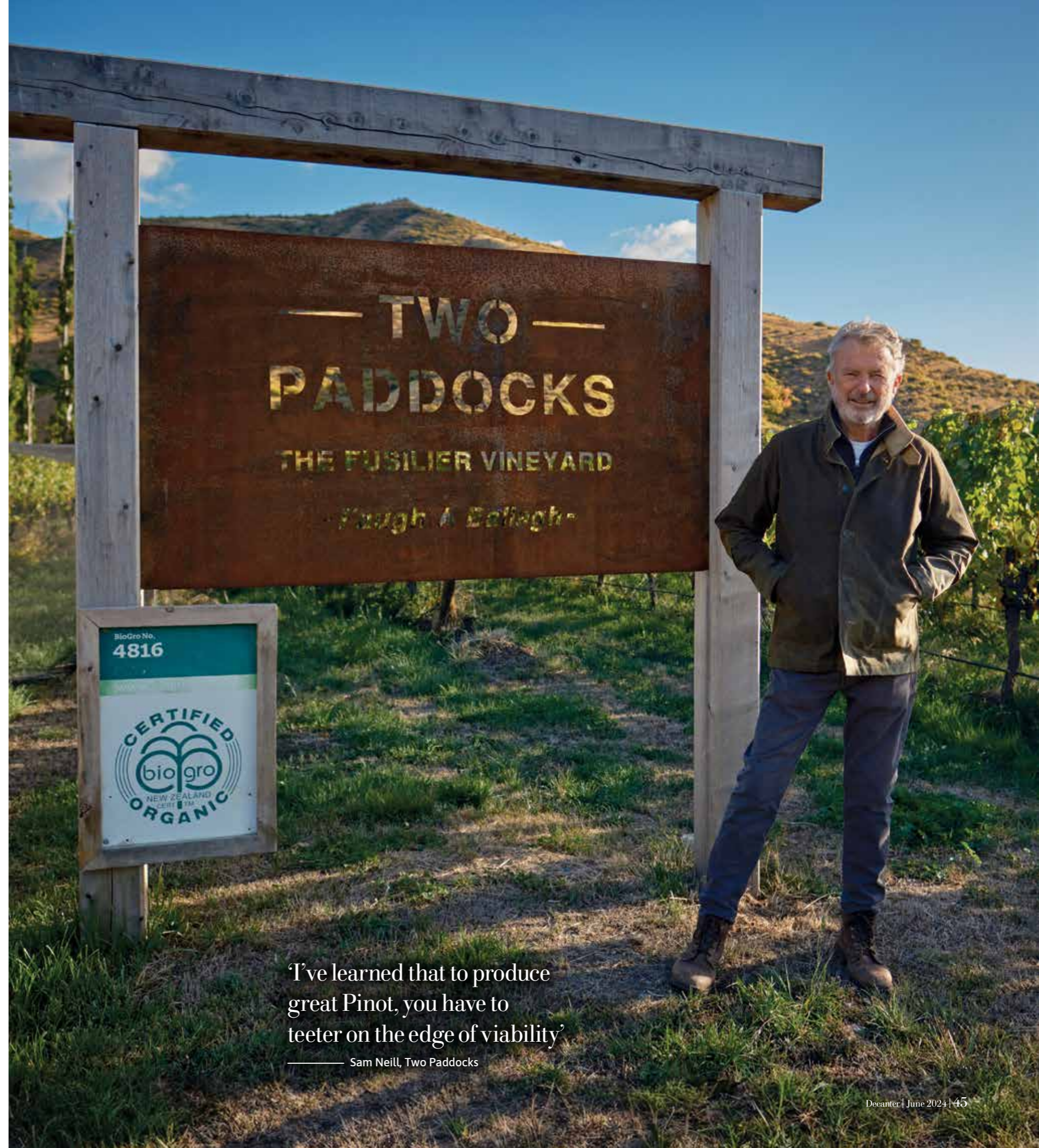
We schedule a Zoom interview, me back in the UK with a bottle of Two Paddocks Riesling open

on my desk as it's 8pm, and Neill apologising for his jet lag at 9am NZ time back on the farm. He has just flown in from the US, where he has been publicising his new TV drama *Apples Never Fall*, co-starring Annette Bening. He perks up the moment we start to talk about wine and we move quickly to his favourite subject, 'Lord Pinot'.

FALLING IN LOVE

In another life, Neill might have joined the drinks trade, as he had family connections. Wines and spirits were a core part of New Zealand company Neill & Co, where his father (post-army career) and grandfather both worked. But Neill showed little interest in drinks until he visited the great actor James Mason at his home on the shores of lake Geneva in 1980, where he was introduced to red Burgundy during a meal at Charlie Chaplin's favourite restaurant. Neill was immediately smitten and is still cross that he can't remember precisely where that first wine originated. He 'continued his love affair with Burgundy for the next 12 years or so', discovering Pinot from Oregon along the way. It was the late Rolfe Mills of Rippon Vineyard at lake Wanaka in Central Otago who first put in Neill's head the idea of growing Pinot there; Neill describes tasting Rippon's 1991 Pinot as a 'lightbulb moment'.

His first vineyard was planted in 1993 in the middle of the Gibbston valley. Neill's film director mate Roger Donaldson bought the next plot along, hence Two Paddocks. 'It really was a gamble,' Neill admits. 'No one knew how those initial two hectares of Pinot would fare in what is quite an extreme climate. Gibbston is the highest region in Central, surrounded by the southern Alps – very cold in winter, heat never guaranteed, and frost can come at almost any time. We had snow up the valley while I was away this year in February.' ▶



'I've learned that to produce great Pinot, you have to teeter on the edge of viability'

Sam Neill, Two Paddocks

PROFILE: SAM NEILL, TWO PADDOCKS

‘Rational people shouldn’t make wine here,’ Neill half-jokes, ‘but I’ve learned that to produce great Pinot, you have to teeter on the edge of viability.’ He now owns three more vineyards: the Red Bank Farm and home base at Earnsclough, Alexandra, bought in 2000; the Last Chance vineyard close to Alexandra, which Neill ventures ‘might be the most southerly vineyard in the world’, through which runs a small water race, hand-dug by gold miners in the 1860s; and finally the Fusilier vineyard in Bannockburn, named after his army officer father. The Fusilier, purchased in 2013, is on Felton Road, very close to Felton Road Wines, and it’s clear the famous location meant a lot to Neill, thanks to the healthy rivalry between the two producers.

DOWN TO EARTH

What makes Central Otago Pinot so special? Neill thinks for a while before replying that the wines are particularly ‘vivid’. Some claim that the gold that may still be in the soil accounts for such vivacity, but he doesn’t have a firm opinion on this himself. Rather he looks for a source of the ‘toasted herbs’ in his wines and finds it in the wild thyme bushes that grow in large thickets across the region’s dry hills. ‘Thyme was planted by 19th-century Chinese gold diggers to ward off insects – now it’s everywhere and it can influence the wine, just as eucalyptus can do in Australia.’

Back at Red Bank Farm, 5.5ha of Pinot and Riesling are joined by many other crops, including lavender (to produce lavender oil), saffron, olives and cherries, as well as oak trees. The oak has been planted by Neill as recompense for his use of barrels in the winery. ‘It’s on my conscience,’ he says. ‘Someone using oak should be planting oak.’

Nigel Greening, the British owner of Felton Road Wines, says that Neill ‘grew up a free-range Otago boy and is always happiest when on the farm... He’s the antithesis of the famous film star with a vineyard – far more concerned with honesty in his wines than in impressing people.’

Notable Pinot wizard Larry McKenna, who has worked as consultant to Two Paddocks over many years, adds: ‘I think he feels the “celebrity winemaker” tag, but he does not sign up to it or think of himself in that way.’

GOING HIS OWN WAY

Conversion to organic viticulture was Neill’s decision – his teammates roll their eyes when remembering his insistence. He ‘hates the scorched earth policy’ and ‘can’t bear to drive past vineyards which are conventional after seeing what herbicides do’. After a short interruption in organic viticulture when weed control had to be



used for newly acquired vineyards, Two Paddocks wines were recertified organic by BioGro in 2017. Neill is the first to suggest that thanks to Central Otago’s low humidity and persistent winds it’s easier to farm organically here than in some areas.

Affable, relaxed but not remotely ‘luvvie’, Neill nonetheless holds some entrenched views. Most are positive – interestingly, he admires the Shiraz of former Penfolds winemaker John Duval, now of the eponymous Barossa winery. But he has his strong dislikes; he loathes ‘horrible corks’ and was ‘absolutely infuriated’ when he lost a third of his 1999 bottles to cork taint. Since 2001, Two Paddocks has only used Stelvin screw caps. And, he declares, ‘Pinot Gris does nothing for me’, in a region where the grape is often extolled.

He does have plenty of time for Riesling, however, having been ‘converted to it in Alsace’ while he was filming there during the 1980s. ‘Riesling planted in Central Otago just sits up and says, “I love it here.” You can’t grow Riesling everywhere, like you can with Chardonnay, but it works here particularly well.’ He points to the kerosene complexity of mature Central Otago Rieslings; certainly his younger wines are promisingly delicious.

Where to next? For now, Neill seems satisfied with his four vineyards in Central Otago. ‘They are all distinctly different and there’s something Burgundian about that. The sub-regions are becoming increasingly recognised and really, I welcome it.’ As for the Two Paddocks style of Pinot: ‘We were making subtle, restrained wines 20 years ago, when Central Otago was getting a name for rather obvious fruit bombs. We continue to go our own way.’

Above from left: the Two Paddocks winery; Sam Neill with vineyard manager Mike Wing, who has been at Two Paddocks since 2004



Two Paddocks at a glance

Founded 1993
First vintage 1997
Owner Sam Neill
Vineyards Red Bank Farm (Earnsclough/Alexandra); The First Paddock (Gibbston); The Last Chance (Earnsclough/Alexandra); The Fusilier (Bannockburn)
Varieties Pinot Noir and Riesling
Organic Certified BioGro since 2017

Central Otago star power – Atkins’ eight from Two Paddocks

① Two Paddocks, Dry Riesling Alexandra 2023 93

£23.95 (2022) ND John
Taut and precise, mouthwatering and dry. Lime shot through with light peach and a dab of salt. From the same Red Bank Farm vineyard as the Picnic Riesling, but aged a little longer on the lees. Could take on spicy seafood or raw oysters. Will age well. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alcohol** 13%

Two Paddocks, Picnic Riesling Alexandra 2023 91

£19.60-£24.50 (2022) Alexander Hadleigh, Fareham Wine Cellar, Harvey Nichols, ND John, Vinvm, Winedirect
Lemon rush, joined by pears and green apples, with a hint of sugared almond. Off-dry, mineral-streaked and elegant, it’s well named, as it would suit a warm weather picnic or informal supper of pork pie or charcuterie. Also an excellent aperitif. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2029 **Alc** 13%

Two Paddocks, Proprietor’s Reserve The Major General 2021 97

twopaddocks.com
Named for Neill’s great-grandfather, this is the inaugural release of a premium selection from the Fusilier, First Paddock and Last Chance vineyards, which represent

the region’s three main valleys. Rounded, ripe, loaded with fleshy, bright ripe strawberry. Supple tannins, an oak veneer and both herbal and pepper twists. Built to age. Organic. **Drink** 2025-2035 **Alc** 13%

② Two Paddocks, Proprietor’s Reserve The First Paddock Pinot Noir, Gibbston 2021 96

twopaddocks.com
Black cherry and plum, black licorice, black olive, sweet spices and a whiff of lavender in a firm wine made with fruit from Neill’s first vineyard in Gibbston, with more tannic structure than usual for the winery. Complex and compelling. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2035 **Alc** 12.5%

Two Paddocks, Pinot Noir 2022 95

£32-£41.50 (2021) Alexander Hadleigh, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Hennings Wine, KVM, London End, ND John, Noble Green, The Guildford Wine Co, Vinvm, Waterside Wines
Beautifully balanced flagship release, made from a selection of fruit from all four estate vineyards. Ripe and richly perfumed, with red cherries and a whiff of violet, followed by fresh blackcurrants, lush mulberry and raspberry, a sprinkle of dried thyme and a little roasted almond. Lifted finish, subtle oak. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 13%



③ Two Paddocks, Proprietor’s Reserve The Fusilier Pinot Noir, Bannockburn 2020 94

£34.17-£48 (ib, 2019) Burnett & Herbert, Farr Vintners, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Home Delivery Wine, London End

From the north-facing terraces at the western end of Felton Road, Bannockburn. Along with dried red cherries and cooked strawberries, there are subtle, exotic notes of rose petals and Turkish delight. This is a savoury, spicy Pinot. Tannins are evident but supple. Wood spice on the finish. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2031 **Alc** 12.5%

Two Paddocks, Proprietor’s Reserve The Last Chance Pinot Noir, Alexandra 2021 94

£34.17-£48 (ib, 2019) Burnett & Herbert, Farr Vintners, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Home Delivery Wine, London End

From the southerly Last Chance vineyard. Intense red fruits – ripe strawberry, red cherry, redcurrant – with dried thyme amid the garrigue woody herbals. Lively acidity and a long finish. Will evolve slowly. Organic. **Drink** 2025-2035 **Alc** 13.5%

Two Paddocks, Picnic Pinot Noir 2022 91

£25-£31.85 (2021) Alexander Hadleigh, Fareham Wine Cellar, Flagship Wines, Harvey Nichols, Haynes Hanson & Clark, London End, Mumbles Fine Wines, NY Wines, Vinvm, Wine Online
From the estate’s four vineyards. Scents of fresh red cherry and blackcurrant. A vibrant, vivacious palate with black cherry joining the other fruits. A long, succulent finish, smooth, with a light chocolate note. This is great on its own but would also work well with lighter dishes. Definitely one to chill. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 13% **D**