

A glass of red with...

SAM NEILL

Celebrated actor, winemaker and all-round good guy Sam Neill shares some early food memories, his love for pinot noir (especially from his New Zealand vineyards) and what success looks like at 77. Just don't get him started on corks

I probably didn't taste anything decent until I was in my twenties. My mother was one of the world's greatest women – as well as being one of the world's worst cooks, God bless her. Then there was boarding school. Then, in 1975, my girlfriend's old boss at EMI took us for dinner to a Michelin-starred restaurant in Mayfair. It was a revelation to me: that food could be more than just fuel – and that pairing it with wine made everything even better.

Wine is one of the great achievements of mankind. We haven't been drinking manhattans that long but for *thousands* of years we've enjoyed wine. It's one of the great keys to civilisation. I'm not interested in just 'drinking', but the idea of a great meal without wine is completely unthinkable to me. Of course, you shouldn't drink too much – but it should be good wine.

Easter lamb is the greatest pairing for pinot noir. Growing up in New Zealand, it's the staple

– but the thing about pinot is it's so flexible when it comes to food. You can even have it with fish if the dish isn't too delicate.

I do like a nice hot cross bun at Easter. I'm no cook. But when my occasional 'cook in residence' is here at my Central Otago ranch, we like to live entirely off the land, so we eat our own meat. I also have a great organic vegetable garden down the hill, so we even use that for the mint sauce with lamb.

I've been in love with Desert Island Discs since forever. What a treasure that programme is. I'll sometimes listen to the podcast when I'm eating. I can't think of a more difficult thing, to get my life down into eight songs. I've been compiling a playlist with a really banal title – it's called 'All Day Favourites' and has about 30,000 songs on it, and I never tire of it.

New Zealand has come a long way in wine terms over the last 30 years. I started planting

SAM'S WORLDLY WINE RACK

One of the great things about a life with wine is discovering all the wonderful regions. I love burgundy and good Australian shiraz but I'm now also a big fan of wines from Ribera del Duero in Spain. Twenty euros gets you a good bottle of wine from there. At this time of my life, discovering a wine region I never knew anything about is delightful.

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my Central Otago vineyards in the early 1990s but the official word 20 years earlier was that you shouldn't grow wine on the South Island *at all*. It was government diktat. Then people started planting sauvignon blanc in Marlborough [also on the South Island]. I'm not a sauvignon drinker but I'm very grateful – it put New Zealand wines on the world stage.

If I have to use a corkscrew, it takes me 10 minutes to calm down. I was personally burnt by mouldy corks in 1999 – 25% of our wine production was ruined. Screw caps are smart things and I would never, ever put my wine under a stupid cork again. People say it's romantic, but there's nothing romantic about corked wine.

At 27, I had no interest in success. I didn't know what I was going to do and I was a bit of a hippie. But I think at this point in my life, I could probably say I've been a bit of a success – and I think the proof is that I'm still working at 77!

The best advice I've received on set? "Don't be pompous, darling." It came from Martin Campbell when he was directing me in the TV series *Reilly: Ace of Spies*. I thought, that's a really good note – why didn't you tell me that at the beginning? We had 12 episodes to shoot and at that point we'd already done six!

If I were to sum up my life in a toast, I think I could now say, "A life well lived". And no question, it would have to be with a glass of pinot. 🍷

*This year Sam stars in new Netflix series *Untamed* and a third series of legal drama *The Twelve*. Find out more about his vineyards at twopaddocks.com*