



Port's holy grail: Quinta do Noval Nacional Vintage Port

Axel Probst investigates the most legendary of all Ports and talks to its current custodian Christian Seely about what makes it so special

Despite some highs and lows during its history, Quinta do Noval holds a special place in the hearts and minds of Port lovers worldwide. And although the quinta does produce amazing colheita Ports and fantastic Noval Vintage Ports, the prestigious Noval Nacional Vintage Port stands above them all.

A quick journey through time: In the early 1930s, most English wine merchants filled their cellars with the fantastic 1927 Vintage Ports, but due to the financial crisis there was little or no motivation to purchase Vintage Ports from the early '30s with a presumably lower reputation. Under those difficult conditions, Noval bottled the first Vintage Port and Nacional with its own label: the 1931. Only a few other companies produced Vintage Ports from that year, among them Calem (a very good mature Vintage Port), Ramos Pinto (now perfect), and Niepoort with a Garrafeira (legendary). "British" houses such as Cockburn, Dow, Graham, Warre, Taylor, and Fonseca did not bottle at all. Members of the Van Zeller family, owner of Quinta do Noval at the time, have told me that the main reason for bottling this Port was a UK importer who strongly requested this vintage. Nowadays, this Noval 1931 and the even rarer Nacional 1931 have almost vanished; I estimate that there remain fewer than 50 bottles of the Vintage. This leads to a stark divide in the world of Port lovers, between those who have been fortunate enough to savor the two Ports and those who would like to have had the same opportunity. Quinta

do Noval Nacional 1931 is the rarest and most expensive Vintage Port ever.

Until the 1960s, the Nacional was bottled only very rarely. From 1960 on, this policy changed somewhat, and Noval was able to produce some very good regular Vintage Ports, as well as some fantastic Nacionais. *Primus inter pares* from the decade of the '60s is the 1963 Nacional, which is the first to live up to the legendary 1931. This Port is my personal benchmark when it comes to awarding the highest scores to Port. But many other Nacionais are not far behind, the 1966 and the 1967 ranking among the very greatest Ports. Unfortunately, after 1970 the quality began to drop remarkably, and together with some unfortunate management decisions (Noval preferred to bottle the 1978s over the 1977s) the quinta's reputation began to decline. Although many harvests from the 1980s through to 1991 were bottled, either as Noval Vintage Ports or Nacional (or both), these Ports do not, alas, live up to the high expectations generated by the wines from the 1960s. Only after the takeover by the AXA insurance company in 1993 (one of the worst years in Port history) and the appointment of Christian Seely as its general manager was Noval catapulted back to its former position of strength. From 1994 on, both Vintage Ports were back on track, receiving rave reviews, the Nacional being back to the superb reputation that it had enjoyed in the past. Fantastic vintages and wines followed, including the Nacionais from 1997, 2000, 2003, 2011, and, most recently, 2016. Even in years when other

leading Port houses did not declare a Vintage Port, Noval declared a number of very good Nacionais, among them 1996, 1999, 2001, and 2004.

In years when there are enough grapes to make a very good Vintage Port, Noval also bottles a “second label,” the Noval Silval Vintage Port. These Ports might not normally age more than 30 years but do offer excellent value, since they are sold at much lower prices than the regular Noval Vintage Ports.

Although best known for its legendary Nacional and superb Vintage Ports, the quinta also produces amazing Tawny Ports—old colheitas, such as 1937, 1964, or 1976, as well as 10-, 20-, and 40-Year-Olds. (There is no 30-Year-Old.)

Quinta do Noval Nacional

From a mere 6,000 vines on 1.7ha (4.2 acres) comes the most expensive Vintage Port. Expensive for at least two reasons: breathtaking quality and minuscule quantities. Everywhere else, Noval’s vines (and those of almost all other producers) are on American rootstocks, but the Nacional parcel is ungrafted, and there have never been problems with phylloxera. Whenever a new Nacional is offered, it immediately sells out, and its price on the secondary market triples within days. No wonder. In 2016, only 1,000 bottles were produced, and half of those are being held back at the quinta.

NOTES

Nacional 2016

Black color with very intense violet reflections. Amazingly dense bouquet, with cassis, chocolate, tobacco, and a red-berry mix, minty notes on top. The same complexity on the palate, with a moderately strong tannic structure and perfect supporting acidity. Cherry, cassis, and blackberry fruit and spicy notes, which last for minutes on the exceptionally long finish. A complex and fascinating aftertaste, with an agreeable astringency. 2040–2100+. | 100

Nacional 2011

Intense violet reflections to the almost black color. A very deep and concentrated bouquet: licorice, cassis, white pepper, and chocolate. The palate continues what the bouquet starts: perfect supporting acidity, with powerful but fully ripe tannins, fantastic balance and length. This will be the logical successor to the 1963 Nacional. 2050–2100+. | 100

Nacional 2004

This was a rather fresh year in the Douro, with few declarations from other houses. Noval, however, did declare a Vintage Port, and released the Nacional some ten years afterwards. Deep dark red color. Intense and fresh palate, with cherry, blackberry, and chocolate. Long, complex aftertaste. 2030–70. | 95

Nacional 2003

From a hot and classic year, this Nacional is still black, with a violet rim. A very intense but precise, mineral and red-berry nose. The palate reveals an excellent acid and tannic structure, pairing red-berry fruit and chocolate. Balanced and very long on the finish. 2040–2100. | 98

Nacional 2001

Deep dark red color. A complex bouquet, with strong cassis and tobacco notes. Freshness on the palate, floral and minty, with dense but fine tannins. The aftertaste is long and fresh. 2030–70. | 94

Nacional 2000

Black color with red and violet reflections. A fruity and complex nose, with lots of licorice and blueberry and strong underlying complexity. The palate shows a fantastic fruity structure, some sweetness and perfectly supporting acidity. Concentrated and long on the aftertaste, with a somewhat dry finish. Now to 2070. | 98

Nacional 1999

My favorite “late-released” Nacional. Almost black, very opaque color. Very complex and strong on the bouquet, without any feeling of being forced: cassis, cherry, and milk chocolate. The same fruit continues on the palate, with a very good supporting tannic structure and perfectly integrated acidity. Long and multi-layered aftertaste. 2025–70. | 97

Nacional 1997

This may well be the Nacional with the highest overall scores, and with good reason. Opaque, deep violet with a reddish hue. A full and complex bouquet, with chocolate, tobacco, cherry, and cassis. Intense but balanced on the palate, with great support from tannins and acidity, and still some primary red-berry fruit with spicy notes. A complex aftertaste, with great finesse. Now to 2100. | 99+

Nacional 1996

Tasted at the “Portwine Day” (September 10) in Porto. Dense and deep dark red. Balanced on the bouquet, with underlying complexity and red-berry fruit. The palate is in its “dormant phase” right now. White pepper, cassis, cherry, and blackberry still evident, and a long, spicy finish. 2030–60. | 94

Nacional 1994

This is Nacional close to its very best. Extremely deep, dark red color. Although the wine is partially sleeping still, one can discern the complexity in the bouquet, with white pepper, raspberry, blackberry, and tobacco. The palate still shows abundant tannins, which are in line with the complexity of the palate. Long aftertaste, even if it does not currently show the fantail finish that it used to, due to its closed phase. 2025–2100. | 99+

Nacional 1991

I have had the chance to taste this Port numerous times but it has never impressed me. Very mature reddish color with orange reflections. I never came across a bottle that did not have vegetal notes in the bouquet, a bit like bitter vegetable soup, albeit with some fruit in the background. Volatile acidity, toasty notes, then bitterness and chocolate notes on the palate. A short aftertaste with some caramel. Maybe the biggest disappointment among Nacionais. Drink up. | 80

Nacional 1987

I was able to taste the ‘87, together with the ‘85 and the ‘78 quite recently at the Quinta, and they all failed to impress, relatively speaking. Transparent, dark red color. Coffee and malty notes on the elegant nose. Noticeable acidity on the palate, with coffee and some red-berry fruit. Better than the ‘85. Now to 2030. | 90

Nacional 1986

I have never seen this with a proper label, but had the chance to taste this with the Danish Port Club in Porto. Medium-red color. An elegant bouquet, with some milk chocolate, coffee, and tobacco. Tired on the palate and somewhat dry. Medium length on the palate. Drink up. | 85

Nacional 1985

Fully transparent medium red. The nose reveals malty notes and some volatile acidity. Malty also on the palate, some raisins with a certain spiciness. Medium-long aftertaste. But we opened three bottles to get to this. Now to 2025. | 88

Nacional 1983

This is probably the best Nacional from the 1980s. Transparent dark red color. Classically aged Vintage Port bouquet, with malty notes, coffee, and some remaining red-berry fruit. Surprisingly intense on the palate, with the rather typical minty notes of some older Nacionais. Long and well-structured on the aftertaste. Now to 2030. | 92

Nacional 1982

As with the ‘85, we needed to open three bottles. Cloudy red color. A very elegant nose, with mild fruit and some spicy notes. Very evolved and quite frail on the palate. A short but rather pleasant aftertaste. Drink up. | 89

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN SEELY: “WE BOTTLE THE NOVAL NACIONAL VINTAGE PORT ONLY WHEN IT SINGS”

Christian Seely took over his first wine estate, the prestigious Quinta do Noval, in 1993 and has dramatically improved the quality of the Ports ever since then. He also raised the quality at Château Suduiraut in Sauternes (from 2001) and the Pauillac second growth Château Pichon Baron (also from 2001). When it comes to passion, Seely still gets emotional about Noval: “The Douro Valley is a fantastic place and one of the most dramatic spots in the world to make wine.”

An Englishman at the top of one of the most prestigious wine companies in France, AXA Millésimes, Seely feels at home pretty much everywhere. But able to run a half-marathon in the steep hills of the Douro Valley, he explains, “One has to stay fit to be able to keep ahead of it all.” Seely fits in as comfortably at a lunch for vineyard workers in the Douro as at a banquet with the great and the good in London. Still disarmingly modest, he says of himself: “The best, maybe the only, thing I can do very well is to hire the perfect people to work for me.”

What is so special about the Douro Valley?

The Douro Valley is wild, beautiful, and free, and its best wines reflect those characteristics. That is why it is a shame that great Vintage Port has for so long been imprisoned in formal rituals about its service, which have been both negative for its image and also, I believe, prevented it from being appreciated as it should be. Above all, it needs to be drunk for the pure hedonistic pleasure of the moment and, please, in a glass big enough so that the wine can be enjoyed as it should be. Whenever you like, with whatever you like, and with whomever you like. That is what freedom is about.

And within this, what is even more special about Noval?

What makes the Douro and its wines great, whether fortified or not, is the individual character of each unique vineyard terroir. In the past, perhaps because so many of the great Vintage Ports were, as they still are, sold under brand names rather than the names of vineyards, this aspect of the Douro did not receive the attention it deserved. Now, this is changing. But Noval has always been the archetypal terroir-based Vintage Port; and its greatest wine, the Nacional, the supreme proof that greatness can come from one very small specific plot of vines. There are, of course, other great vineyards in the Douro, but I think that Quinta do Noval is in some way emblematic of the Douro and of the idea that the quality and diversity of all its wines are the expressions of individual vineyards.

You took over responsibility for Noval in 1993, after quality had hit an all-time low and its reputation was at stake. What did you change

to be able to produce these amazing Ports from 1994 onward?

The vineyard itself needed a lot of love and attention, and we replanted over 100ha [250 acres] in the period 1993 to 2000. This has had a long-term effect on the quality of Ports we have been able to produce recently but obviously changed very little in the ‘90s. Above all, though, it was about creating a great team of professional people devoted to Noval and its wines. I had the great good fortune that Antonio Agrellos agreed to become our technical director, and then we were able to promote and recruit a team of enologists and agronomists around him, all inspired by the idea of working together to make Noval great again. In these circumstances, with a great terroir and a great team, the managing director’s principal role is to provide the will to make something great and to make sure that everyone shares that dream and can work in harmony toward fulfilling it. Antonio has now retired, and I am thrilled that his nephew Carlos Agrellos has taken over as technical director, thus providing continuity and rejuvenation to the team, which otherwise remains unchanged.

Tell us a bit more about the world’s most expensive and rarest Vintage Port, the Nacional?

The Nacional is an extraordinary wine, made from the grapes of the tiny Nacional parcel at the heart of Quinta do Noval. The vines in this parcel are not grafted onto American rootstock, hence the name “Nacional”—Portuguese vines directly in Portuguese soil. They are visibly less vigorous than the grafted vines that surround them, producing tiny yields. The Nacional is quite unpredictable; in some years that may be lovely Vintage years for the rest of the quinta, it just may not produce a great Vintage (as happened in 2007). When that occurs, we do not declare it. Sometimes, on the other hand, we get a great Nacional in a non-Vintage year, as in 1996. When that happens, we do declare it. I consider my main role with respect to the Nacional to be that of guardian of its reputation. It should be declared only when it is outstanding, but when it is outstanding it should be declared.

So, this is why there is a fantastic 2015 Vintage Port, but no Nacional?

This is a trick question, as you well know! There are some years when we just make the Quinta do Noval and no Quinta do Noval Nacional. There are some years when we just make a Quinta do Noval Nacional. There are some years when we make both and announce them both to the market. And finally, there are some years when we make a Quinta do Noval Vintage Port and a Quinta do Noval Nacional Port and only announce the Quinta do Noval, keeping the Nacional in reserve for release at a future date. We did this with the 2001 and the 2004 Nacionais, both of which were released about ten years after the harvest. I will perhaps tell you about the Nacional 2015 sometime between now and 2025. If there is one, of course.

What makes the Douro great is the individual character of each unique vineyard terroir. Noval has always been the archetypal terroir-based Vintage Port. There are other great vineyards in the Douro, but I think that Quinta do Noval is in some way emblematic of the Douro and of the idea that the quality and diversity of all its wines are the expressions of individual vineyards

At my perfect dinner I would start with Champagne, then have a Sauternes for starters, followed by a red Bordeaux, and finishing with a Port. The only one of those styles not in the AXA portfolio is Champagne. Is this why you started the Coates & Seely sparkling-wine project in England?

Well, I have always loved good Champagne, and the fact that I do not make one does not stop me from drinking it on a very regular basis. I have made my life in France and in Portugal, and that is where I shall stay, but I was born an Englishman—nobody is perfect—and I think the real reason I started Coates & Seely in Hampshire, with my partner Nick Coates, was a desire to try to make a world-class sparkling wine in England. In certain areas in southern England, there are chalky soils geologically very similar to those of Champagne. So, we have 12ha (30 acres) planted with Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier in a beautiful chalky valley in Hampshire. We made our first English Sparkling there in 2009, and are now producing about 60,000 bottles a year, which are selling rather well. I believe we are proving the point that it is possible to make world-class sparkling wines in England, so as a personal adventure it has been both satisfying and fun.

Last question: Of all the Quinta do Noval Ports, which one would be your wine to take to your desert island?

It rather depends on when you would banish me to the island. Supposing that it would be in about 20 years, which would give me time to carry on working for a while at Noval, this widens my possibilities to include some recent years that by then would begin to be perfectly ready for drinking. It might well in that case be the 2016 Nacional. On the other hand, it could be the 2017 Nacional. If we decide to declare one.



NACIONAL AT THE CONNAUGHT AND SELFRIDGES IN LONDON

Several vintages of Nacional are among the extensive ranges of Quinta do Noval Ports being made available by special arrangement with two of its most prestigious customers in the UK capital: The Connaught Hotel, home to Two-Michelin-star restaurant Hélène Darroze, and the department store Selfridges.

The 26-strong Noval Collection at The Connaught, including the 1963 Nacional, is the most exceptional in the UK, and possibly in Europe. Among the Noval Ports offered at Selfridges are the 20- and 40-Year-Old Tawnies; seven Colheitas, from the oldest, exceptionally rare, sublime 1937, to the 2000 (also available in 6-litre Methusalahs); the 1966, 2000, 2003, and 2008 Vintages; and the following vintages of Nacional: 1996 (£1,550 per bottle), 1997 (£2,550), 1999 (£1,850), 2000 (£1,500), and 2016 (£750). Bottles may be personalized with a free glass-engraving service until December 14, 2018.

Nacional 1980

Transparent medium-red color with a noticeable rim. Elegant nose, with malty and minty notes, tobacco in the background. Soft and balanced on the palate, with malt, chocolate, and spice notes and a touch of honey. Rather long on the aftertaste. Now to 2015. | 91

Nacional 1978

Fresh red color with some brown notes on the rim. Coffee, malt, and chocolate on the nose. A soft and balanced palate, with coffee and hints of mint. Short aftertaste. If you still have any bottles in your cellar, do not wait until its 50th birthday. Drink up. | 90

Nacional 1975

Very clean medium-red color. Raisins and milk chocolate on the bouquet. Some supporting acidity on the rather elegant palate, toffee and caramel, some floral notes. Short aftertaste. Drink up. | 88

Nacional 1970

One of the stars of this amazing year. Fully transparent dark red color. A still astonishingly fresh and spicy bouquet, balanced and complex, with an attractive scent of tobacco in the background. Soft and complex on the palate, with coffee, malt, chocolate, and cherry. A very long finish. Now to 2050. | 98

Nacional 1967

It took me a while to understand this Port, as I thought for a long time that it was lacking fruit and body, but especially over the past ten years it has been showing marvelously well. Deep red. Although now fully mature, this Port appears

to be roughly ten years younger than one might expect. Plums, chocolate, and mineral notes on the nose, with mixed herbs in the background. Deep, complex, and structured on the palate, with plum, cherry, hints of spearmint, chocolate, and tobacco. A long and complex aftertaste. Now to 2060. | 98

Nacional 1966

Another fantastic Noval Nacional. Almost youthful deep red color. Precise and intense on the bouquet, with malt, honey, and chocolate. The palate reveals tobacco, malt, and caramel, lots of complexity and intensity, with fabulously integrated supporting acidity. Long, multi-layered aftertaste. Now to 2070. | 99

Nacional 1964

From an off-year, with very few declarations from other producers. Fully transparent, red color. Malt, honey, menthol, black tea, and chocolate. Soft and somewhat creamy on the palate, with minty notes, milk chocolate, and toffee. Long and structured on the aftertaste. Now to 2030. | 95

Nacional 1963

I believe that if ever there were a book on a single Vintage Port, this would be the one. I have never read a comment on this Port where it did not achieve the highest rating. Still an incredibly youthful red, with almost no rim. A balanced but structured and complex nose, with coffee, toffee, and chocolate, even still some residual red-berry fruit. Full and complex on the palate, with an explosion of coffee, toffee, and minty notes. Although the palate takes you on a rollercoaster ride, the aftertaste lasts even longer and is perfectly balanced. This would be my desert-island Port (preferably in a double magnum). Now to 2100+. | 100

Nacional 1962

Another year when only a very few producers bottled a Vintage Port. Brown reflections on the mid-red color. Intense coffee and malty notes on the nose. Noticeable supporting acidity on the palate, with coffee and toffee. Medium-long on the aftertaste. Now to 2030. | 94

Nacional 1960

Although my only tasting note is for a mid-shoulder bottle, this Port was surprisingly fresh even then. Fully opaque, medium-red color. Almond, malt, and coffee on the nose, balanced and structured. Perfectly mature on the palate, with coffee, malt, and some raisins. Long and complex aftertaste. Now to 2040. | 96

Nacional 1955

A very narrow rim to the medium-red color. Intense malt and honey on the bouquet, which develops perfectly with more time in the decanter. Balanced and intense on the palate, with toast, malt, and minty notes. Long and strong on the finish. Now to 2040. | 95

Nacional 1931

The rarest, but also surely one of the greatest and most timeless, of mature Vintage Ports, seeming to possess the secret of eternal youth. Very concentrated but balanced on the bouquet, with toffee and fruity notes. There are still some soft tannins, as well as toffee, honey, and malty notes on the palate, which finishes with a very long and multi-layered aftertaste. This Port may be old but it certainly does not seem so, and is far from tired. What a pity that one does not have one or two cases through which to follow its development into wherever the future may take it. Now to 2100. | 99