

Quinta de Noval, Nacional 1931

Douro, Portugal

A legend because...

There is no shortage of great Port-producing houses, although most of the best known, such as Graham's or Taylor's, have always been in British hands. Quinta da Noval is the great exception. This beautifully located property has always made memorable Ports, but it's the rare Nacional bottlings – from a small parcel of ungrafted vines – that set the pulses of Port lovers and collectors racing. Nacional 1931 has entered the history books as the most prized of all vintage Ports. Its supreme quality defies the notion that the oldest vines give the greatest wines, as in 1931 the vines were a mere five or six years old.

Looking back

When António José da Silva bought Quinta da Noval in 1894, the vineyards had been almost destroyed by phylloxera, and had to be replanted. However, da Silva retained 1.8 hectares of vines on their own roots, and the wines produced here were kept apart from the regular bottlings and released, in exceptional vintages, as Nacional. By the time the 1931 vintage was ready to be declared, da Silva was handing over the property to his son-in-law Luis Vasconcelos Porto. Vasconcelos Porto was impressed by the wine's quality but unsure that he could sell it, since sales of the great 1927 vintage had been sluggish, but it was one of his British importers who convinced him to declare it. Family disputes later led to the sale of the estate to its present owners, AXA Millésimes of France, in 1993.

The vintage

1931 was not an acclaimed vintage for Port; only two other shippers declared it. The reason had little to do with the quality of the wines: it was the shippers' misfortune that the vintage came in the middle of the worldwide economic slump.

The terroir

The Nacional vines – no more than 5,000 – were planted on northwest-facing terraces along the drive leading to the house. And although they are ungrafted, they are not ancient: there are vines over 60 years old in the parcel, but the average age is around 35 years. When they are no longer productive, they are replaced. Unlike the rest of the Noval vines, they are not replanted on American rootstocks, but remain on their own roots. The fruit character is very different from the grapes used for the regular Noval vintage Port, as the foliage growth is less vigorous and the berries are far smaller, giving very low yields – about half those for the main Noval



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vineyards – and thus intense concentration of flavour and higher tannin levels.

The wine

After harvest the grapes are foot-trodden in a small lagar. The Nacional grapes are vinified separately every year, but the wine is rarely released. During its traditional ageing in used pipes for about two years, the wine is continuously assessed. If it fails to measure up to Nacional standards, it is not declared.

The reaction

For Michael Broadbent, this is 'the Everest of vintage Ports'. In 1982 he said: 'I noted its amazing high-toned bouquet which reminded me of eau de cologne, Armagnac, and a sort of ultra-refined liquorice. Although only medium-sweet, it was incredibly full-bodied, a rich, bittersweet wine, spicy, of great length.' James Suckling in 1989 noted: 'The Port is still incredibly rich and youthful... with a focused chocolate and cherry nose, medium-bodied, with great balance, a superb concentration of fruit and a never-ending finish.' In 2002 Clive Coates MW summarised his six encounters with the wine over the previous decade: 'The colour is still an intense black-purple. The nose is creamy rich, crammed with very high quality fruit, and on the palate there is an intensity coupled with a class which seems effortless. But the finish! Few wines have this length and this complexity. A really very great wine.' In 2004 Port blogger Roy Hersh wrote: 'Amazing depth of flavours prevailed... overwhelming intensity to the sweetness of the juice.' Wine collector Cary Feibleman wrote, in an article on his favourite wines in *The Underground Wineletter*: 'One of those 21-out-of-20 point wines for incredible richness, concentration, complexity and a finish that goes on for five minutes.' **D**

THE FACTS

Bottles produced about 2,500

Composition Touriga Francesa, Touriga Nacional, Tinta Roriz, Sousão

Yield 13 hl/ha

Alcohol 20%

Release price N/A

Price today an English-bottled example sold at Christie's in 2006 for £4,840

by Stephen Brook