

THE REBIRTH OF QUINTA DO NOVAL

THE HISTORIC PORT HOUSE DISPLAYS A STERLING TRACK RECORD UNDER CHRISTIAN SEELY'S 25-YEAR TENURE



Quinta do Noval's 353 acres of terraced vineyards rise more than a thousand feet above the Douro River.

BY JAMES MOLESWORTH

Vintage Port may not seem to be the best example of a “*terroir*” wine. It gets the benefit of being produced only in the best vintages, and the wines are often blends of different vineyard sites. But all great wine is driven by the vineyard first, so the qualitative peaks that Vintage Port achieves arguably come from more than just good winemaking in select years.

At Quinta do Noval, managing director Christian Seely is proving that Port, just as any other great wine, fortified or not, is shaped inexorably by its *terroir*. By merging tradition with modernity over

a 25-year run, Seely has put this property back among the elite Port producers. It's fitting that Noval would assert itself as a standard-bearer not just for quality Vintage Port but for *terroir* as well—it's the only historic Port shipper that uses the name of its vineyard for its brand.

Though founded in 1715, the modern reputation of Noval was made by its legendary 1931 Nacional, a rare single-parcel bottling. Other high-water marks include the 1955, '63 and '66 Nacionais, as well as the estate's Vintage Ports made in those same years, under the ownership of the Da Silva family. Eventually the family tree extended to the Van Zellers, who transitioned to running the

business in the 1970s and '80s. The estate fell on hard times economically, and the vineyard suffered. Wines from the '70s and '80s—save for arguably the delicious 1985—failed to live up to the property's lofty reputation. In 1993, French insurance firm AXA purchased Noval and brought in Seely to manage it.

Upon his arrival, Seely admittedly knew little about the production of Port. "I knew how to drink it, but that was it," he says with a smile. "I had been in the venture capital world and what I knew was business, and how to turn businesses around. Noval needed a turnaround. I liked Port. And so I got the job."

Using the benchmarks of the 1950s and 1960s as his guide, Seely set about returning Quinta do Noval to glory. His first move was to hire Antonio Agrellos as technical director. Agrellos had been the consulting winemaker at the estate under the previous owners, and Seely felt his familiarity with the property would be a valuable asset. (Agrellos worked with Seely up through 2017, before retiring. His nephew Carlos was appointed technical director starting with the 2018 vintage.)

Seely and Agrellos set to work in the vineyard immediately. They oversaw a large-scale replanting program that turned over 247 of the estate's 353 acres of vines (nearly 70 percent) between 1994 and 1999. To put that in perspective, most similar-sized châteaux in the Médoc of Bordeaux typically take a much more conservative approach, replanting just a few acres per year in order to maintain the overall production level of the estate.

"The approach was simple," says Seely. "We believed in how good the potential was for Quinta do Noval's vineyard. So if there was a parcel that was not delivering Vintage Port quality in a good year, then something was wrong. The wrong variety in a certain spot, or the wrong clone, for example. Granted, I might not do it that way if I had to do it over again—it was drastic."

Seely combined traditional and modern approaches to manage the upheaval in the vineyard. Keeping the terraces primarily as they always had been, Seely maintained the high density of planting. But he made the terraces workable by tractor, with equal distance between walls and access points up and down the slopes.

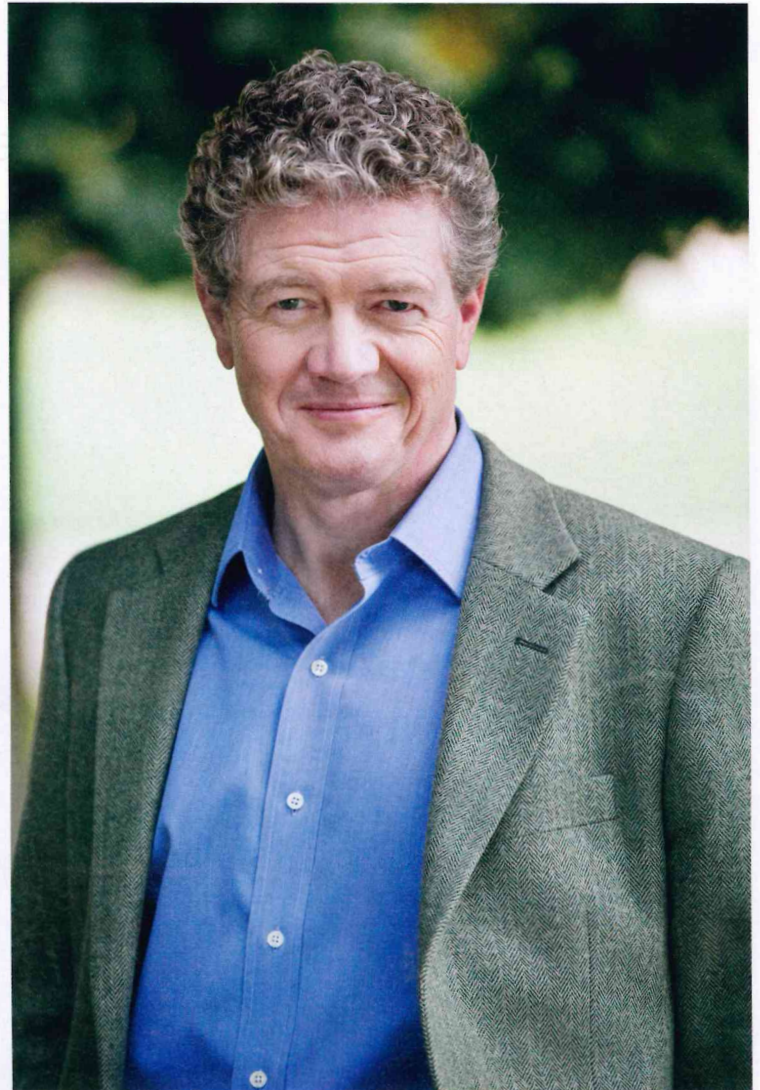
"We increased quality with better vine material. Then we knocked off one of the major problems of working the steep slopes of the Douro—cost of labor—by being able to mechanize the vineyard work. And we did it all while maintaining the aesthetics of the vineyard," he says proudly.

Rising from 320 to 1,600 feet of elevation above the winding Douro River, the vineyard is a verdant display of concave and convex ribbons of vines planted in fractured schist soils. The varying exposures and range of elevations allow Seely to play with a few of the Douro's permitted varieties, Touriga Nacional being the dominant grape, along with Touriga Franca and Tinta Cão.

"Grape varieties were selected according to their suitability for each parcel. For example, in lower, hotter parts of the vineyard, Touriga Franca might be chosen, while in the middle range of altitude Touriga Nacional might be chosen," explains Seely. "The proportion of Touriga Nacional in particular was much increased. Touriga Nacional is a difficult grape. It is naturally very low-yielding, can have difficulty with heat and drought [common in the Douro] and is very sensitive to any difficult conditions during flowering. For these reasons, the percentage of Touriga Nacional plantings in the Douro has been relatively low, in spite of its huge quality

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Christian Seely took the reins at Noval in 1993, quickly embarking upon an ambitious replanting program that led to the replacement of nearly 70 percent of the estate's vines.

potential. By planting a large percentage of the vineyard with Touriga Nacional, you are showing that you are prepared to put up with the growing difficulties and low yields of this variety in the pursuit of the highest possible quality."

With the vineyard restructuring in full swing, Seely set about tweaking the winery itself. Stone *lagares* used for fermentation are the tradition in the Douro, but their porous nature makes them susceptible to hygiene issues such as *brettanomyces* and volatile acidity. In addition, temperature control was not common in Douro wineries at the time—and the Douro is a decidedly warm growing region. As in the vineyard, Seely kept traditional aspects while adding in the benefits of modernity.

"In terms of technology, we simply went from one stone age to another stone age," says Seely with a light laugh. "Previously the

floors of the *lagares* were schist, which has the disadvantage of being porous and difficult to clean. We removed all the schist floors and replaced them with granite. We also rebuilt the walls of the *lagares*, which were already granite, but added jointings of epoxy resin between the stones. The channels used to run off the juice were given temperature control. In doing all that we kept things simple, but eliminated the potential hygiene problems.”

To understand how the changes and progression at Quinta do Noval have played out in the wine, I sat down with Seely to taste through a vertical of 21 different bottlings of the estate’s Vintage Port and Nacional Vintage Port, covering Seely’s entire tenure as well as some older vintages. All of the wines except one were sourced directly from Quinta do Noval’s cellar.

The changes show up quickly. The 1985, made under the previous ownership, is charming and aromatic but perhaps slightly volatile. Beginning with the 1995, however, the wine shifts to show a dramatically sharper focus and more vivid fruit aromas and flavors. In addition, Seely prefers a drier style of Port and the wines under his oversight are markedly more muscular and grippy than earlier vintages, which show a rounder, sweeter and more flattering profile, most notably in the ’66. (For tasting notes on the wines, see the chart on page 114.)

The most dramatic moments in the vertical tasting occurred with the run of vintages from 2011 through 2016, the newest release. Since 2011, Quinta do Noval has declared a Vintage Port in every vintage, the only Port house to do so. That coincides, Seely believes, with the point at which the vineyard was fully back on line and mature following the replanting period. Seely’s approach is to bottle a maximum production level of around 5,000 cases in the generally declared years, as quality permits. In years when other houses elect not to declare for qualitative reasons, Seely trims production to around 1,000 cases, making a severe selection in order to maintain a high quality level while allowing the vineyard and vintage to express themselves.

The result is a display of *terroir* and vintage character that is thoroughly unique. In the generally declared years such as 2011 and 2016, the wine is a racy torrent of black and blue fruit flavors, bristling with energetic, brambly grip. In the vintages where Quinta do Noval is nearly alone in declaring a Vintage Port, the wine still maintains the house style—vivid fruit, detailed structure—but with the variable of vintage nuance mixed in. Cool sage and mint edges mark the 2014 (a wet and cool year) while a bright raspberry coulis streak defines the 2013 (a dry season with late rains that forced a slightly earlier-than-desired harvest).

The crown jewel of Quinta do Noval’s vineyard, the Nacional parcel, was not part of the replanting program in the early ’90s. Considered by many Port lovers as the greatest Vintage Port, Nacional is sourced from a minuscule 5-acre parcel of ungrafted vines

that are harvested, vinified and aged separately every year. And though the Nacional vineyard has remained virtually unchanged (dead vines are replaced one by one), it too seems to have been given a breath of fresh air. Whether it is eventually bottled and released as a Nacional Vintage Port is a decision that Seely makes, and unlike with the estate Port, he rarely decides yes. There have been only 32 bottlings of Nacional released since 1931 (37 percent of the time) and only 10 in the 25 years under Seely’s management (40 percent).

In this tasting, the 1931 Nacional was still showing breathtakingly sleek, polished and fresh green tea, ginseng, sesame, salted caramel and hazelnut notes, while the 1963 Nacional matched it with an equally beautiful display of toffee, incense, dried cherry, bergamot and green tea notes that were precise and incredibly long. Both the ’31 and ’63 Nacionals are legendary, and they were singing in full throat at this tasting, offering not just a faint glimpse



A vertical tasting of 21 bottlings of Noval Vintage Port demonstrates the continuing evolution of this elite estate.

into the past but a vivid and detailed look at the DNA of this extremely rare pre-phylloxera parcel. It was the first time Seely himself had tried the ’31, as there are no more bottles at the estate (the bottle was sourced from the cellar of *Wine Spectator* editor and publisher Marvin R. Shanken). While the 1931 and 1963 duo lived up to their exalted reputations, it was the vivid fruit, remarkable energy and nearly unbridled power of the 1997 and 2016 Nacionals that seem to herald the rebirth of the estate with chest-thumping authority.

In the wine world, it’s accepted wisdom that it takes 10 years for a winemaker to understand a vineyard and for a wine to show how it evolves. When the massive replanting at Noval was completed in 1999, Seely had rebooted Quinta do Noval and in doing so reset that 10-year clock to zero. When 2011 arrived, Seely had completed his learning curve and the vineyard was able to display the quality and character of its *terroir*. By choosing to then release a Vintage Port in every year, Seely and Quinta do Noval have shown that *terroir* defines great Port, and given new life and direction to this storied estate. □

A Retrospective Tasting of 21 Vintages of Quinta do Noval

The wines included in this chart were tasted non-blind by James Molesworth in May 2018. Initial U.S. release prices are indicated where available in parentheses; older vintages appear rarely at auction, so accurate pricing is unavailable.

WINE	SCORE	WINE	SCORE
Vintage Port 2016 This has terrific energy from the start, with a bramble note inlaid in the core of cherry and plum paste flavors. Sappy, sweet and fresh, with a plum cake-infused finish. Gains focus and polish as it stretches out in the glass. Best from 2030 through 2055. (\$125)	97	Vintage Port 2000 Warm, inviting and generous in feel, with ganache, tobacco, mulled plum and melted licorice notes rolling through. The finish pulls everything together, delivering a fleshy swath of enticing fruit and spice. Lacks the drive of the more recent vintages, but this is thoroughly delicious nonetheless. Drink now through 2040.	94
Vintage Port Nacional 2016 Shows nearly unbridled energy, yet remains extremely compact now, bristling with brambly grip that is decidedly dry in feel. The core features saturated plum and black currant preserves, with baker's chocolate, plum eau-de-vie and roasted apple wood notes tucked deep in reserve. Powerfully rendered, with a nearly endless finish. Best from 2035 through 2060. (\$1,000)	99	Vintage Port 1997 Shows a light lifted hint, leading to very expressive bergamot, blood orange and sandalwood notes, backed by darker steeped plum and raspberry fruit flavors. This has a warm feel through the finish, with a bramble hint echoing solidly. Gorgeous now, and there's no rush. Best from 2020 through 2040.	96
Vintage Port 2015 Intense boysenberry, fig and plum reduction flavors are backed by a bramble-filled finish. Youthfully tight and backward, this is a touch more muscular in profile than the '16, though it is still very polished in feel. A brick house in this not-widely-declared vintage. Best from 2030 through 2050. (\$110)	95	Vintage Port Nacional 1997 Surprisingly inviting, with warm plum compote, singed anise and subtle toffee flavors. The finish asserts itself in short order though, with grippy bittersweet cocoa and tobacco notes. Long, with rugged charm and muscular drive that seems to blossom with air. Decidedly different from the regular bottling. Best from 2020 through 2050.	98
Vintage Port 2014 Cooler in feel, showing hints of sage, mint and anise, with gently mulled edges to the plum cake and cherry compote flavors at the core. This offers density, but it's inviting already. Not as sleek or energetic as the '15 or '16, but very solid nonetheless. Best from 2020 through 2035. (\$110)	91	Vintage Port Nacional 1996 Very dry in style, with a grippy alder spine carrying bitter plum, black currant and juniper notes. Shows some wild herb and violet accents as well, gaining intensity and grip through the finish. Tightly focused and very distinctive. Best from 2025 through 2050.	96
Vintage Port 2013 This is bright, fresh and lively, with red currant and raspberry coulis flavors streaking through, picking up violet and anise notes on the long, supple finish. A charming, lighter-bodied vintage, built on purity, this will be accessible earlier. Best from 2020 through 2035. (\$110)	93	Vintage Port 1995 Still fresh, with a redder profile of cherry, raspberry and aniseed notes. Shows a sweet edge to the finish, but stays restrained and elegant overall, with charming cedar and sandalwood accents checking in. Very enjoyable. Drink now through 2030.	92
Vintage Port 2012 A grippy style, with lots of tobacco and charcoal notes coursing along the edges of the core of plum, black currant and fig paste flavors. Slightly chunky in feel, but the power and depth are there, revealing a swath of warm ganache on the finish. Best from 2025 through 2040. (\$110)	94	Vintage Port 1994 This is dreamy, with rooibos tea, blood orange coulis, cherry paste and bergamot notes. Very long and refined, with a finish showing persistent perfume and a very silky feel. A joy to drink. Drink now through 2035.	95
Vintage Port 2011 Extremely dense, yet remarkably sleek in feel, delivering a torrent of dark plum, black cherry and cassis. Long and very refined through the finish, with a terrific graphite spine. Offering a very focused beam of fruit and structure, this will outlive many of us. Best from 2025 through 2055. (\$110)	97	Vintage Port 1985 Fully mature, with warm fruitcake, lightly toasted cinnamon, sandalwood and blood orange flavors gliding through in unison. Very silky and perfumed, this doesn't have the density and drive of the modern-day vintages, but there's nothing wrong with its elegance. Tasted from magnum. Drink now through 2025.	91
Vintage Port 2008 Shows a grippy profile, with dark ganache, loam and <i>sauvage</i> notes lurking. Lots of tobacco, chestnut, bitter plum and fig paste flavors form the core, with everything rumbling through the finish, leaving behind echoes of mint and sage. Best from 2020 through 2040.	92	Vintage Port 1966 This shows a more tawnylike profile, with caramel, toffee and toasted sesame notes, showing surprising viscosity. Long and sweet through the finish, with a lovely echo of green tea. Drink now through 2025.	92
Vintage Port 2007 A huge wine, with very prominent plum cake, fig paste and blackberry compote flavors taking the lead. Shows loads of grip, with hints of tobacco, ganache and chestnut that have started to peek out through the finish. A fleshy, powerful version that is just starting to show what it has. Leave this be for a while. Best from 2022 through 2042.	94	Vintage Port Nacional 1963 Toffee, incense, dried cherry, bergamot and green tea notes provide the aromas here, with mulled plum and licorice flavors forming the core. A light singed balsamic accent lines the finish, which is viscous and sweet-edged but stays decidedly dry in feel overall. Harmonious and incredibly long. Drink now through 2030.	99
Vintage Port 2004 Offers a sweeter feel than its younger colleagues, showing warm licorice, plum cake and pudding notes. Very fleshy, almost opulent in feel, with a long, chocolate-coated finish. Relatively accessible now, but this will cruise for a bit. Best from 2020 through 2035.	93	Vintage Port Nacional 1931 This is haunting, with green tea, ginseng and brown sugar notes gliding through. Remarkably polished and fresh in feel, with sleek, clean waves of sesame, salted caramel, hazelnut and dacquoise blossoming through the finish. A light floral echo at the very end adds lift and length. The flavors are elegant, yet the viscosity remains fully intact. If you have a bottle, why not see if it can get to 100 years old? Drink now through 2031.	99
Vintage Port 2003 Intense, with cherry paste, fruitcake, singed spice and apple wood flavors giving this a warm feel. Shows ample grip and lovely energy throughout, keeping this from being heady. Explosive fig and licorice snap notes on the finish kick this into second gear. A fun drink now, but this has fuel to burn. Best from 2020 through 2045.	95		