



The Naked Vine

by Mike Rosenberg

Tarrica Wine Cellars

Some of you who read my less-than-enthusiastic writeup of the last Cincinnati Wine

Festival may remember

that I still managed to run across a couple of wines I really enjoyed. One of the real finds at this little event was Tarrica. I did a double take when I tasted their merlot, and had a really nice conversation with their rep, Michael Gwin, about the wines, the winery, and sundry other things. Michael was good enough to set me up with a raft of their wines to sample.

Tarrica Wine Cellars is the 1999 creation of winemaker Sam Balakian, who named the winery after his two daughters, Taryn & Erica. Tarrica is located in Paso Robles -- a region gaining more and more national recognition outside of corkhead circles. Tarrica wines are made to be, in Balakian's words, "both affordable and immediately enjoyable." I could certainly speak for the first. All of the wines were listed between \$9-15 (except for the petit sirah, which I've seen as high as \$30).

So, how were they? As you might be able to ascertain, these are built to be solid wines you don't need to think about a great deal. Tarrica's selections aren't made to compete with the high-end stuuf from Paso, but they're certainly as good, if not better, than many California wines you'll find at similar price points.

I thought Tarrica stood out by...well...not having anything really stand out. For relatively inexpensive wines, I certainly noticed that they were crafted with balance in mind. Many of these bottlings succeeded on that front. Some were certainly better than others, in my opinion, but I'm certainly comfortable inviting you to see for yourself. Here's what we tasted, more or less in the order we tried them:

Tarrica 2007 Merlot -- Yep. I led off with this to make sure that I wasn't off base at the festival. I was instantly pleased, since it was almost exactly as I remembered. It tasted like a mainline Bordeaux, which I think is out of the ordinary. There's usually not a lot of earthy flavor in California wine, and this certainly has a bit of the "tasty funk." Now, I'm not talking Chateau Latour here or anything -- but for the price, I'd taste it blind against some \$20-25 French bottles and probably fool a lot of folks. Good berry and floral nose with a solid tannic structure and excellent balance. Definitely recommended.

Tarrica 2009 Pinot Gris -- Fairly substantial body for a pinot gris. You can tell there's a little residual sugar, but it comes across as more of a honey flavor than simply sugary. It's got a lighter taste than the weight implies. Decent flavor with crisp acidity. When I first tried it, there was a little astringent nip at the finish, but that faded after the wine had been open for a few minutes. A decent enough pinot gris, just not out of the ordinary.

Tarrica 2008 White Zinfandel -- "I just can't do it." The Sweet Partner in crime looked askance at her glass. We don't usually allow this type wines into the nest unless I'm making sangria. In the name of science, though, I tried it. Like most white zins, it's quite sweet -- strawberries are the main fruit flavor initially. It does subdue itself a bit before finishing sugary. If you're into this sort of thing -- it's a good glass of white zin. I will admit, though -- I did end up making a spritzer out of the bulk of it.

Tarrica 2008 Chardonnay -- Very serviceable Chardonnay. Definitely made in a California style with the oak and butter, but neither get overwhelming. The nose is oaky, and the flavor is a good steady balance of fruit, butter, and oak. Nice smooth pear flavors on the palate. Good weight with a gently creamy, smoky finish. I'd certainly get it again.

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Wine advice for the rest of us. . .

Tarrica 2008 Riesling -- Not one of our favorites. A little heavy on the sweetness, but I'll readily admit to preferring drier style Riesling (unless I'm eating something really fiery, that is). I got apples on the nose and tongue. Sweet-ish finish. We had it with supermarket sushi, and it was decent, but I could have found a better one without too much difficulty.

Tarrica 2008 Pinot Noir -- Another very pleasant surprise! A very light-styled pinot that drinks best with just a hint of a chill. (A few minutes in the fridge after you open it will do the trick.) The nose is floral and delicate. Pinot noirs at this price tend to be either very fruity and almost thick or so light that there's barely any flavor. The Tarrica, however, is a very straightforward, well-constructed pinot. I got smoke and cherries all over the place, with a well-balanced flavor and a gentle finish. I really liked this wine, especially for the value.

Tarrica 2007 Petit Sirah -- If you think, "What would a petit sirah taste like if it were toned down a bit?" -- you'll understand where this wine is coming from. Bolder petits are more my speed, but it was a solid enough quaffer to have with evening chocolate. There was plenty of fruit, but that was more or less it -- not a lot of complexity and the tannins were light. I got blueberry flavors in a medium bodied wine, and the finish just sort of fades away. When I saw the price, however, I was surprised. There's a decent blueprint for a wine here, but I think it's probably better to wait a year or so until their yield gets better to try it again.

Tarrica 2008 Zinfandel -- The Tarrica "subtlety" motif certainly holds here. Definitely a smokier, more restrained wine than a lot of inexpensive California zins, which I don't see as a drawback. Not a fruit bomb by any measure. The nose has a strong vanilla tone. It remains a pretty muscular wine with plenty of fruit, but it's got smoky complexity and solid tannins, especially on the finish. Very drinkable and a very solid value. Grilled up a couple of steaks with this one and they went very well.

Tarrica 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon -- Nicely complex and another solid value. Plenty of blackberry on the nose with good black cherry and blackberry flavors. Not overly full-bodied, but very pleasant as a good "drinkin' cab" with its solid set of flavors. Good length on the finish with some lasting mild tannins. A perfect choice for a "third bottle" on an evening where you might be sharing some red wine and chocolate with good company.

Tarrica 2009 Sauvignon Blanc -- Peaches on the nose. Some mineral on the palate with a little more residual sugar than I usually like. Fruity rather than acidic on the finish. I'd certainly recommend it if you like softer, non-grapefruity sauvignon blancs. Otherwise, it's a decent enough early evening/late afternoon quaffer.

Old Shandon Port Works Paso Robles Syrah Port -- One of two dessert wines that Tarrica offers up. I enjoyed this wine more a couple of days after I opened it. Right after opening, the sweetness was a little overpowering, but that backed off after a day and the wine grew more interesting. Some raspberry and chocolate flavors start showing up, the latter especially on the finish. The bottle reminded me, flavor-wise, of an Australian port. For a cold evening, it'll warm you up right enjoyably.

Tarrica "Koda" Dessert Wine -- Anyone who's followed this blog for any length of time knows that one of my tests of a red wine is trying it with something chocolate flavors. I was curious to see what would result when Tarrica took the above port and infused it with chocolate essence. The result? Well, I'll call it "interesting." The sweetness of the port runs a little roughshod over the chocolate flavors, which are pretty subtle. Long, chewy flavors and a warming glow at the end. I thought it was interesting and worth a try, and I think a lot of folks would probably like it if they're into dessert wines. I'd probably stick to getting the "component parts," however -- having the port and chocolate individually.