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BY CHRISTIAN EEDS

SOME PRODUCERS ARE MORE READY TO GROW THE MARKET THAN OTHERS.

IN THE HIT SINGLE "Hard Knock Life", top US performer Jay-Z intones, "Let's sip the Cris and get pissy-pissy," with "Cris" being yet another reference by a rapper to Cristal, the prestige cuvée from the Champagne house Louis Roederer.

Packaged in its trademark clear bottle with gold foil, Cristal sits at the pinnacle of the Roederer range, the newly released 1999 vintage selling for around \$300 (the equivalent of R2100) a bottle in the US. Not surprisingly, it has become a significant part of the "bling" lifestyle favoured by the hip-hop community.

This however leaves Frédéric Rouzaud, managing director of Louis Roederer; nonplussed. Asked recently by *The Economist* magazine if an association between Cristal and hip-hop might actually hurt the brand, he replied "That's a good question, but what can we do? We can't forbid people from buying it."

With even more French insouciance, Rouzaud goes on to suggest "I am sure Dom Pérignon [made by Moët & Chandon] or Krug would be delighted to have their business". To make matters worse, all of this appeared under the sub-head "Unwelcome attention".

Jay-Z, who happens to be president and CEO of Def Jam Recordings and one

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of the most influential people in popular music, inevitably got to hear about this and his response was emphatic. No Cristal to be served in any branch of the 40/40 Club, the trendy chain of sports bars that he owns, and, what's more, a call for the bubbly to be boycotted throughout the world of hip-hop.

You can understand both men's positions. Rouzaud would like his bubbly to be consumed by the discerning, with it remaining untainted by hip-hop and its connotations of misogyny and violence. Jay-Z went so far as to say that he considered Rouzaud's comments "racist".

You suspect however that what Rouzaud is guilty of is not so much racism as elitism. He appears to want to reserve his wine for an inner circle of refined palates rather than promoting it to the public at large.

But Rouzaud is missing a trick. Hip-hop culture is all about the disenfranchised of America's inner cities celebrating in very conspicuous ways when they succeed

in order to impress others. They might not be totally au fait with wine to begin with, but that will change over time.

South Africa has its own previously disadvantaged population not afraid to indulge in "bling" and it's interesting to note what Mike Ratcliffe, co-owner of Vilafonté in Paarl, has to say about selling this ultra-premium wine locally.

The Vilafonté range consists of two blends, namely the Series M (selling for \$50 a bottle in the US and R250 locally) and the Series C (\$70 in the US and R350 in SA). Maiden vintage was 2003 and originally the intention was to focus on the US market exclusively, but SA sales proved "fantastic", with the local market absorbing a total of 200 cases as opposed to the predicted 50.

This encourages Ratcliffe. "Supposedly consumers prefer single variety wines as these are easier to understand," he observes. "However, I'm finding the Cristal drinkers at the top end are more discerning than they're given credit for."

Nevertheless, Ratcliffe recognises that there are still significant limitations to selling ultra-premium wine locally. "The weakness of the South African market is not that there is no cash or demand for luxury goods. Rather, it is that there's no demand for wine. My potential clientele all drink Johnny Walker Blue." That's something that he would like to change, as opposed to his counterpart at Roederer who is so reluctant to move into non-traditional markets.

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