vinetur

The ongoing legal dispute between Louis Roederer and Renegade Urban Winery over trademark infringement

Champagne tycoon Louis Roederer files lawsuit against renegade urban winery over 'Crystal' naming

Wednesday, October 25, 2023



In a move that has shaken the world of viticulture and oenology, the Champagne giant Louis Roederer has initiated legal proceedings against Renegade Urban Winery, a modest London-based winery. The crux of the dispute lies in the name "Crystal," used by Renegade Urban Winery for its bottles of pet nat pink wine, a name which Louis Roederer alleges infringes upon its renowned £300 Cristal Champagne brand.

Louis Roederer, a prestigious name in the Champagne industry, was established in 1776 and has since been a stalwart in the realm of high-quality sparkling wines. Its flagship brand, Cristal, was initially crafted in 1876 for Tsar Alexander II of Russia and has transcended its royal origins to become a symbol of luxury and prestige. The brand gained massive popularity in the 1990s and 2000s within the hip-hop community, often referred to as 'Crissy' in songs by prominent artists like Jay-Z, the Notorious B.I.G., and Tupac Shakur.

On the other side of the legal battlefield is Renegade Urban Winery, managed by Warwick Smith. Since 2018, the winery has been marketing a $34 bottle of Crystal Pet Nat Pink wine, named in honor of a customer, Crystal Lai, whose name and likeness appear on the bottle's tag and label.

According to the legal notice served by Louis Roederer to the Walthamstow-based Renegade Urban Winery, the use of the name "Crystal" is alleged to breach the trademark of its Cristal Champagne brand. The letter demands an immediate cessation of the production and sale of any products using the Crystal name. Interestingly, the notice highlights that the only distinction between the two products in question is the spelling of the name—specifically, the letter 'Y' in Crystal as opposed to the 'I' in Cristal.

Warwick Smith, owner of Renegade Urban Winery, has described the situation as "the third battle of Champagne" in an interview with the Mail. He expressed bewilderment at the legal action, considering the diminutive scale of his operation compared to the behemoth that is Louis Roederer. Smith labeled the legal action as "ridiculous" and stated, "We are tiny, I mean, tiny. In terms of Cristal, they sell 300-400,000 bottles a year, and our maximum production capacity across our entire range is about 70,000 bottles."

While Louis Roederer declined to comment on the ongoing case, the situation brings up compelling points for examination. For instance, the considerable differences between the two wines in terms of price, grape variety, production methods, and even the very nature of the wine (Champagne versus pet nat pink wine) raise questions about the validity of the trademark infringement claim.

Smith has also pointed out multiple dissimilarities between the two products, including the wine colors, grape types, and even the labels. "The wine colors are different. Ours is not Champagne; theirs is. The grapes are different; the labels different. The spelling and pronunciation are different. It's bizarre," he remarked.

However, from a legal perspective, the issue boils down to whether the consumer can be confused between the two products, given the reputation of Cristal and the specificities of trademark law.

Warwick Smith acknowledged that his firm lacks the financial resources to combat the lawsuit vigorously but said he would seek legal advice. This case could set an interesting precedent in the wine industry, especially concerning trademark rights and the extent to which they can or should be protected.

While the court's decision remains to be seen, the unfolding saga between Louis Roederer and Renegade Urban Winery serves as an intriguing chapter in the ever-complex world of wines and trademarks, where even the mere similarity in names can spark a legal imbroglio.