Pretty in Pink
15 June 2006    by Neil Pendock

Launching a non-vintage Champagne is something of a contradiction in terms, but that said, Veuve Clicquot hosted a stonker in the triple-decker penthouse on the 33rd floor of the Michelangelo Towers last Thursday. With 360 bottles for 120 guests (at R419 retail, a pop) the stuff flowed like Champagne, writes Neil Pendock.

Douglas Green Bellingham has raised the bar for over the top wine launches with the Pink Party. If Truman Capote’s famous Black and White Ball at the Plaza defined New York society in the swinging sixties, then the Pink Party was Sandton putting on the Ritz, forty years later. Capetonians flown up for the bash marveled at the brashness and trashy pizzazz of Sandton socialites.

What better venue to celebrate the rosé renaissance than in a faux renaissance palace with negative edge plunge pool, his and hers alfresco showers (not for the vertigo challenged) facing the Inanda Club’s polo fields, glass staircase, private in-flat lift and mirrored loos so you can check-out your bottom. As the sun set behind Northcliff, pollution transformed the vista into a Table Mountain moment.

The party itself was suitably OTT with guests buzzed by a latter-day Red Baron as they necked oysters nesting on pink mini-icebergs, snacked on (red) caviar blinis and nibbled salmon inside-out fashion sandwiches. Conspicuous consumers were clearly not too bothered by the JSE crashing 33 floors below or the antics of central banker Tito Mboweni who raised interest rates 50 basis points an hour before hundreds of pink helium-filled balloons were released to float skyward, like so many bubbles in a cosmic crystal flute.

But with such an extravagant launch, can DGB expect to make any money from the product? My supermarket Deep Throat estimates the SA Moët market at 90 000 litres per annum (ten thousand cases) and notes that one northern suburbs branch of her hypermarket empire shifts a dozen Dom P. (discounted to R949 a bottle) per week. Veuve, which tries hard to remain 5% more expensive than Moët, is probably around two-thirds Moët volumes and given the profit margin of the Grande Marques over normal champagne, the marketing spend is clearly there.

If you’ve champagne tastes and a bottle beer budget, Champagne Charlie Jean-Philippe Colmant from Franschhoek offers Champagne Tribaut Brut at under R150/bottle (including VAT and free shipping to any address in SA), if you buy a case. For a full list of available fizz, click on the website www.colmant.co.za.

Tribaut is a small family producer with 20 ha of its own vineyards and as J-P says 'it relies on a faithful portfolio of regular customers who appreciate its style. Many of them are connoisseurs looking for the best value and not ready to spend half their money on labels.'

At a recent blind tasting of lesser-known champagnes hosted by Cathy White from distributor NMK Schulz at Scusi in Parkview, I scored the Tribaut half a point (out of 20) less than the Taittinger (15,5 and 16, respectively), which retails at double the price.

But then if packaging and branding account for 80% of the decision to
buy a bottle of wine, how much greater is the aspirational urge when it comes to Champagne. While Tribaut Brut Rosé may indeed be ‘a fruity Champagne, dominated with red fruits flavours such as blackcurrant and raspberry. Nice complexity and balance and a superb light salmon colour’ and costs one third of the price of Veuve, nobody’s going to throw an outrageous Pink Party to launch it. Alas.

Meanwhile DGB is fast confirming its reputation as the party animals of SA wine. Parties were undoubtedly the highlight of Cape Wine 2006 and the hottest ticket was to the one hosted by DGB at Antique, the restaurant owned by Christian Barnard Jnr. On arrival, guests were given a corporate nightgown 'to transform you into Hugh Heffner' by two ladies wearing nothing but body paint and the logo 'nude since 1685.' A cheeky allusion to Cecil John Rhodes' Boschendal operation, the winemaking parts of which were bought last year by DGB after a short interregnum when they were owned by real life pirates of the Caribbean and divers friends of the late Brett Kebble.

Body painting was supervised by a mysterious Russian countess and the nubile nudes were kept perky by cocktails of chilled Jägermeister and Red Bull. International wine buyers, hacks and assorted hangers-on sipped Jim Beam and single malt whiskies before enjoying a chocolate desert tastefully served in the nudes' navels at 3am.