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January 12, 2007--A couple of months after ending his eight-week stint as legal eagle Billy Flynn in the Broadway revival of *Chicago*, multiplatinum selling recording artist Usher Raymond IV has assumed his newest role: a wine bar owner.

Raymond, 28, and his financial adviser Solomon Smallwood of Atlanta-based TSG Financial L.L.C. (formerly MadisonSmallwood Financial Group), teamed with Jack Mazur, CEO and founder of Atlanta-based The Grape Inc., to open a wine bar, restaurant, and retail franchise in Atlanta's trendy Inman Park.

Raymond and Smallwood have equal ownership in the franchise, which opened Dec. 14, 2006, just east of the city's downtown area. Raymond and Smallwood declined to disclose how much they invested in the venture. Raymond plans to open a New York City location in 2007 and is eyeing Los Angeles, Las Vegas, London, and Tokyo for additional locations by 2010.

"I think my objective for being a businessman is the fact that I don't plan on dancing around stages and being on the road until I am 60-years-old. I definitely want to have a plan," Raymond says.

Raymond, who bought a minority ownership in the Cleveland Cavaliers NBA (www.nba.com/cavaliers/) franchise in March 2005, is one of a growing number of black celebrities including Sean "Diddy" Combs, Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, Beyoncé Knowles, "Nelly" [Cornell Haynes Jr.] making moves beyond the studio and stage with business ventures outside the entertainment industry.

Raymond says he searched for a franchise brand to partner with for some time, but nothing Smallwood presented complemented his image. Then early last year, Smallwood struck gold when he suggested partnering with The Grape.

"You always want to involve clients in investments they identify with or have a passion for. If it's something they are not passionate about and that they do not enjoy it's almost like finding yourself in a job you don't like. People don't work hard for things they aren't passionate about," Smallwood says.

To help ensure The Grape was a stable investment, Smallwood, 38, says he researched the brand, which included sitting in the parking lots of existing locations to observe customer traffic and talking with employees. Smallwood says he was so impressed by The Grape that he opened his own franchise in vacation hot spot Destin, Florida.

Raymond's Atlanta location features amenities such as a double-sided fireplace and a VIP room. Raymond hopes his spot will transform inexperienced wine drinkers into connoisseurs.

"People don't know about the experience of wine. That's why The Grape is so nice because when you go there, you'll find something that you'll love," Raymond says.



Usher with his business partners outside The Grape in Atlanta. Pictured (l-r) Marty Thallman, Usher Raymond IV, Jack Mazur and Solomon Smallwood

Photo Credit: Joe Hans for the Reynolds Group

In addition to an extensive wine offering, The Grape also offers a number of exclusive wines.

Although it hadn't gathered specific numbers on wine bars, a restaurant operator survey conducted by the National Restaurant Association says wine is the beverage all table service restaurants expect to grow fastest this year with 50% of casual dining restaurants and 65% of fine dining establishments expecting higher wine sales in 2007.

"A wine bar tying into the increasing popularity of wine allows consumers to experiment with a wide variety of different wines in a convenient setting," says Hudson Riehle, senior vice president of research for the National Restaurant Association.

Providing access to wine in a nonintimidating environment inspired Mazur, 64, to co-found The Grape in 2000 with his wife, Lynn. Four years later the company entered its first franchise agreement. With 21 locations, primarily in the southeast, Mazur expects 80 additional stores will open in the next five years. Each Grape generates \$900,000 to \$2 million in annual sales says Mazur.

Raymond also has plans for men's and women's fragrances and clothing lines to launch in 2007.



The Grape
300 N. Highland
Atlanta, GA 30307
404.577.4662

Photo Credit: Joe Hans for
the Reynolds Group

Interested in The Grape or other franchises?

The Grape Wine Bar
www.yourgrape.com

Franchise Finder
<http://www.franchisesolutions.com/be/index.cfm>

Business-Minded Celebrities

Beyoncé Knowles (www.beyonce.com) with her House of Deréon (www.dereon.com) clothing line; Jay-Z with his 40/40 Club (www.the4040club.com), Rocawear clothing line, and interest in the NBA's New Jersey Nets (www.nba.com/nets/); Sean "Diddy" Combs with his Justin's Restaurants and clothing line Sean John (www.seanjohn.com); and Nelly (www.nelly.net) with his Apple Bottoms (www.applebottoms.com) and Vokal (www.vokal.com) clothing lines and investment in the Charlotte Bobcats (www.nba.com/bobcats) have started businesses outside the entertainment industry.

