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Independent Media Centre

Published on *Aotearoa Independent Media Centre* (<http://indymedia.org.nz>)

Racist insult blamed for brawl between Crowe and Watson.

Just a lovely bunch of coconuts.

16.11.2002.

By ALISON HORWOOD.

The stoush between Russell Crowe and Eric Watson began after the Oscar-winning actor called the Warriors "a bunch of coconuts", a friend of Watson says.

The Weekend Herald understands that before the fight broke out the pair were dining together at the swanky London eatery Zuma.

A source who spoke to Watson yesterday said the multi-millionaire businessman and Warriors owner went to the restaurant with actress Francesca Guise, whose father is a business colleague, and her friend. They ran into Crowe, who invited them to join him.

The manager of Zuma told the Weekend Herald the group was the last to leave before closing and "all had loads to drink".

During dinner Crowe, a high-profile South Sydney league fan who bought the club's historic bell for \$51,600 to help them fight for reinstatement in the NRL, began to smash plates and criticise the Warriors.

"It was about the skin tone, he was calling them coconuts or darkies," said the source.

One of the women at the table began to cry, and Watson asked Crowe why he was behaving so irrationally.

"He [Watson] left the table to go to the bathroom and while he was there, Crowe confronted him," said the source.

"From what I can figure out, Eric defended himself well and dealt to him, but the fight was broken up by one of Russell's minders."

The source said the minder held Watson's arms so Crowe could get in a few punches.

Restaurant staff called the police, who arrived just before 1am.

The source said Watson had gone to Paris on business and was "slightly sore" and disappointed but was trying to put the incident behind him.

Crowe, who several Hollywood websites claim has Maori blood from his great-grandmother, has a reputation as a drinker and brawler.

New Zealand friends of Watson say he is fit, runs every day and, although he loves good wine, does not drink to excess.

"He is disciplined. It would take a lot to provoke him," one told the Herald.

Crowe has played a Roman gladiator, a tough cop and a skinhead neo-nazi, but his physical prowess has been questioned during his much-publicised scuffles.

His fighting ability was thrown into doubt when a fight was caught on video outside a nightclub in Coffs Harbour in 1999. The tape later became part of a blackmail case in court and reduced a jury to helpless laughter.

This year Crowe was rescued by his female bodyguard and personal trainer for Gladiator, five-times world karate champion and former wrestling star Lourene Bevaart, after he apparently picked a fight in a Mexican resort.

A New Zealand friend of Crowe said, "He is a bloke and he likes his beer."

He added that the media made too much of some of the actor's altercations. Crowe was intentionally provoked and set up because it made good press.

An aunt, Audrey Crowe, would not comment on whether she believed the star had a problem with drinking and fighting.

Source URL: <http://indymedia.org.nz/article/64563/racist-insult-blamed-brawl-between-crowe>