

Hunting for a Huchet

Words and pictures by John Saker



ie HUCHET

ERON EN MUSCADET



Jérémie Huchet with his bottle of Mission Estate Huchet Syrah.

It began as one of those slow Friday afternoon Google goof-offs. I was entering the names of people who had been in my orbit decades ago – the boy that lived across the road from us in London in 1960, the third form English teacher with the cool paisley shirts, the girl I ached to see on the bus every morning when I was 12.

How about doing some research that might be useful, I scolded myself. So I typed in the name 'Huchet'.

Cyprien Huchet was a Marist Brother and the first winemaker in New Zealand who actually knew what he was doing. He arrived in Hawke's Bay in 1871 and set about transforming what is now Mission Estate, our oldest winery. Under his watch, Mission became the first wine operation in the country to sell wine to the public and the first to plant pinot noir and pinot gris.

Like all those first 'Frères Maristes', Huchet was French. He was born into a winegrowing family near Nantes in the Loire, which accounted for the know-how and skill he brought to his work in Hawke's Bay.

My search quickly revealed that Huchet is a fairly common name in the north of France, and some nearby places. The last man to be hanged on the Channel Islands (in 1959) was a Huchet. Who knew?

So I refined the search to 'Huchet wine'. That threw up references to the top syrah produced by winemaker Paul Mooney and his team at Mission Estate, a wine they have named in honour of their pioneering vigneron français.

But there, halfway down the page, I saw what I'd been hoping to find. It was the website of a Loire Valley wine estate, very close to Nantes, that carried the name Huchet.

In Europe, wine estates have the habit of being passed from one generation to the next, down through the centuries. Could this be the same estate that was home to our first serious winemaker before he became a man of faith and emigrated to the south seas?

I immediately sent the estate an email, introducing myself, supplying the Brother Cyprien story and asking if there might be a familial link.

The following day Jérémie Huchet, the current owner and winemaker responded. He attached a document that supplied his direct Huchet line going back to the 17th century. No sign of a Cyprien, but that wasn't surprising. For one thing the Marists changed their names when they entered the order. For another Cyprien probably would have been a younger brother and this direct line representation (in effect, a family tree that was all trunk and no laterals) didn't include the names of the siblings of each generation.

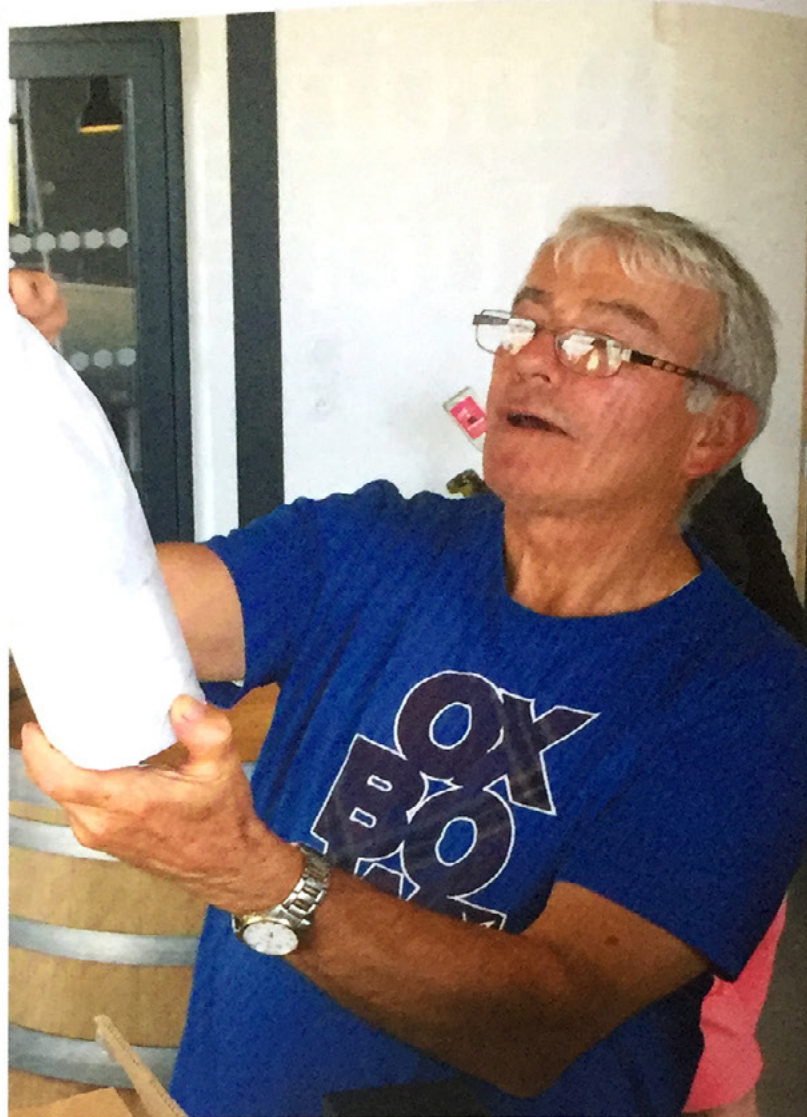
Jérémie Huchet said he was very pleased to have been contacted and promised to dig further. And if I was ever in the Loire

Which I was, just a few weeks ago.

One morning, from my base in Chinon, I struck out in the rental for Chateau-Thébaud, the small town just beyond the southern outskirts of Nantes that is home to Jérémie Huchet, Vigneron en Muscadet. Beside me in the car was a bottle of Mission Estate Huchet Syrah, an Antipodean offering kindly supplied by Paul Mooney.

What followed was one of those days that glow with an aura of happy warmth.

Jérémie, his wife Stéphanie and the whole winery team were there to greet me. We tasted through the very fine range of Muscadet the winery produces. Made from the white grape Melon, these are typically dry, spare, mineral wines that sing alongside seafood.



Jérémie's father Yves examines the mysterious gift from the New World.

(Melon, incidentally, doubles as the French word for bowler hat, which explains a bowler's presence in the winery's visual imagery).

For a long time, the wines from this corner of the Loire were not particularly fashionable in global markets. That has been changing. Recent taste shifts away from heavy, woody styles in favour of lighter, fresher wines have been good for Muscadet. Jérémie's new winery building, which includes a visitor tasting room, projects a certain confidence.

Jérémie Huchet, and his father Yves, were thrilled to receive the bottle of Mission Estate Huchet. It was passed around family and friends with reverence, like some wondrous, precious artefact. Jérémie returned the favour, handing me a bottle of their best Muscadet which I have relayed back to Paul Mooney.

Over lunch in the Huchet household, we shared everything we knew about Brother Cyprien. We know that he was the son of Jean and Marie Huchet, born in 1835 and christened Laurent. His birthplace was the town of Vertou, a mere eight kilometres from Chateau-Thébaud.

"It is very a common name here. But we will keep trying to find out more," said Jérémie.

So the genealogical link has yet to be established definitively. It doesn't really matter. A connection has been made that may well continue meaningfully with or without it.

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