

# DECANTER

## \ BEN THOMAS HAILS BLUE POLES



(CATHERINE SHARLAND)

MARK GIFFORD

It's occurred to me over the past couple of years that winemakers are a generous bunch. Something wine lovers don't always see is how the wine industry – from the biggest wine companies to the small grower-producers – rallies behind various causes. The support given to Yarra Valley wineries affected by the 2009 bushfires in the form of equipment, grapes and donations came from all over the country.

When typhoon Haiyan wrecked the Philippines' central islands, Margaret River winemaker Mark Gifford didn't waste time trying to raise money to help in the rebuilding.

Gifford is a geologist by trade and for the past four years has divided his time between his winery, Blue Poles, and the Philippines.

"Everyone in the Philippines knows someone who was affected by the disaster; it's a national tragedy. The Philippines has been struck by loads of little disasters in the past six months and they're becoming stretched," he says.

"I've got to do something – I've worked there for so long that I have to help the locals."

Gifford's fund-raising plan? To sell his award-winning wines at wholesale cost and donate \$2.50 per bottle direct to the rebuilding efforts.

"We hope to raise two or three thousand dollars and I'll try and use a local organisation and directly deal with a village or location rather than go into one of the bigger NGOs," he says.

"Having worked there for the past four years, you can see how that structure works when you visit the regions and you want to support that system. Right now there's a lot of people doing medical work and dealing with distraught people. We can't be part of that – it's too difficult – but we can be part of the rebuilding phase.

"One of my staff members is from the region and I'll be able to work with him to work out the best way to distribute the funds. It just has to happen quickly."

Gifford has visited Tacloban City, which bore the

brunt of Haiyan's fury, twice to review geology projects.

"It's a large town population-wise, but not infrastructure-wise. They often have a single hospital, small airport and old town centre surrounded by shanty towns," he says. "The actual construction of these towns, compared with Australia, is rather flimsy, and when they lose something they really lose a lot. It's very difficult to get back up off the ground because they don't have a lot of back-up."

Ideally, the money Blue Poles raises will go towards helping a small village get back on its feet.

"There's a rebuilding program that has to come into play. There's a lot of villages where it doesn't cost much to get the money into them. They have a system known as padala, which is like money from the phone," Gifford says.

"Once it's set up you can get money sent directly to a mayor or village captain to distribute the funds. They can basically give that to people as a wage to start rebuilding. The village can rebuild itself quickly, but it does need that money to be circulating again. They rely heavily on that process."

Gifford will send updates to people who take up the Blue Poles offer, detailing how and where the donations have been spent.

Having tried Blue Poles' entire current range – and with a fair amount of the 2008 Allouran cabernet franc-merlot in my cellar – I'm always happy to recommend all their wines and, on this occasion, doubly so. \

[bthomas@theweeklyreview.com.au](mailto:bthomas@theweeklyreview.com.au)

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