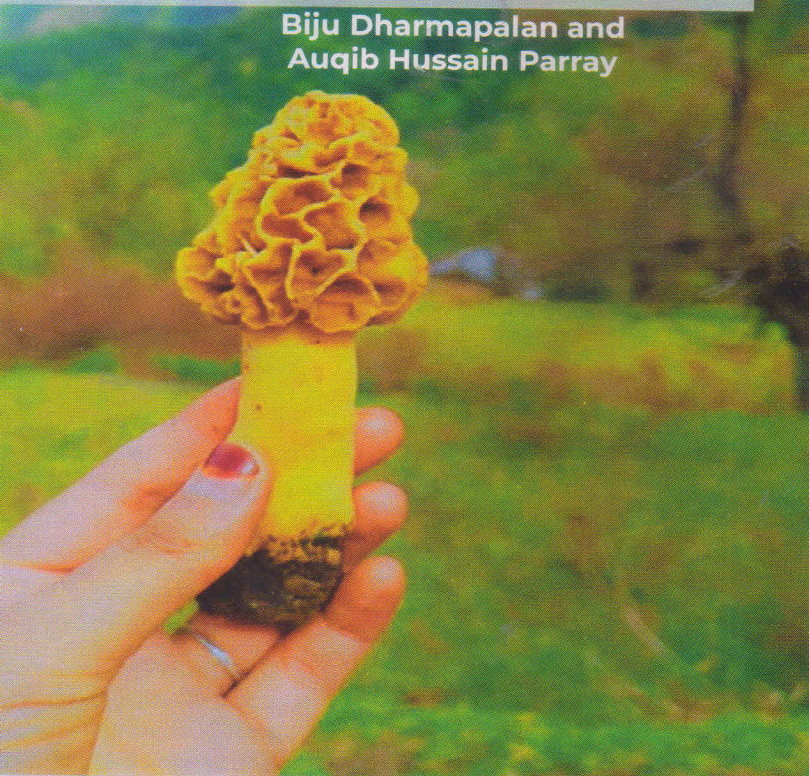


# Kashmir Morels

Rare heirloom crop that needs conservation

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**K**ASHMIR is considered the 'Paradise of Earth' because of its natural beauty and unique culture. The valley is famous for its spices like saffron, and temperate fruits like apples, walnuts, apricots, and the multi-course meal 'Kashmir Wazwan', the traditional food. Among this long list that makes Kashmir unique is the 'Gucchi', Kashmiri morels, locally known as 'Kanigitch or Gitch'. Scientifically known as *Morchella esculenta* (L.) Pers., it belongs to the family Morchellaceae of the Ascomycota. It is one of the prized edible mushrooms that give a unique signature to Kashmir.

Kashmiri morels thrive in the cool and damp forests of the Kashmir Valley. Guochi is primarily found in Rajouri, Poonch, Doda, Kishtwar, Kupwara and Ramban districts of Kashmir. These exquisite mushrooms have been treasured for centuries and traditionally harvested by local foragers during spring. As the snow starts to melt, signalling the arrival of spring, these skilled individuals venture into the woods in search of these elusive fungi.

The mushroom group Morels is renowned among gastronomists worldwide for their delightful flavour culinary gems appreciated across various cuisines due to their unique fragrance, delicate taste, and robust consistency. Prominently regarded as a culinary delicacy internationally, they are frequently prepared with vegetables in Tibet and India and

compared in culinary significance to meat or fish. Due to their distinct umami taste, morels are commonly used as a food flavouring agent, whether utilised fresh or after undergoing procedures such as air or freeze-drying.

The Kashmiri morel stands out due to its distinctive appearance, resembling a cone-shaped sponge. Its cap is characterised by a honeycombed structure with a pitted and wrinkled surface, displaying colours ranging from light yellow to dark brown. The hollow stem seamlessly attaches to the cap, forming a harmonious structure. The pileus, also known as the uppermost portion of the plant, constitutes approximately 70-80 per cent of the plant's overall weight. The pileus exhibits a circular or irregular depression and is 3-9 cm long and 2.5-4.8 cm wide. The colour may vary, ranging from yellow, brown, and light to black. The lower portion of the plant, referred to as the stalk or stipe, accounts for 20 to 30 per cent of the plant's total weight. This unique shape and texture contribute to the high demand for Kashmiri morels worldwide among chefs and culinary enthusiasts.

They grow in habitats such as roads, road cuts, excavation sites, lightly burned grassy areas, and swampy ground. These fungi are reported to be found in areas that have experienced fire damage or lightning. The fruiting bodies of *Morchella* sp., commonly known as morels, showcase a significant