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## From Jumla to the World: Nepal's Heritage Grains at a Crossroads

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In Jumla, the value of rice begins long before it reaches a plate. It is shaped by altitude, the cold season, irrigation channels and a calendar of sowing and harvesting that has to fit a difficult mountain environment.

A bowl of reddish rice in a Kathmandu restaurant may arrive with a premium identity attached: Jumli Marsi. But the grain's story starts with farmers who must preserve seed, bring in a crop and find a market capable of paying for more than the romance of its origins.

In October 2026, that story has an international audience. Nepal is bringing its heritage foods to the World Food Forum in Rome. The opportunity is real. Whether it translates into more reliable incomes in Karnali is a different question.

## **A rice shaped by altitude**

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization describes Jumla Marshy Rice, often called Jumli Marsi, as a crop with a long history of cultivation along the Tila River. FAO's Mountain Partnership records production in highland areas between roughly 2,400 and 3,050 metres above sea level.

Those numbers matter not because they make a good marketing superlative, but because growing rice in cold uplands demands practical knowledge. Farmers need varieties adapted to their climate and systems that deliver water at the right time. The seed is part of the local agricultural memory.

FAO describes the rice as naturally tolerant of low temperatures and culturally important in Jumla. Its distinct colour and identity attract attention in markets beyond the district. But local knowledge should never be reduced to a quaint symbol of the past. It is a working response to particular environmental conditions.

In the same way, the words 'traditional' and 'indigenous' should not automatically be translated into 'unchanged'. Farmers adapt

techniques, cooperate with traders and respond to markets.  
Preserving a crop can require innovation.

## **The food on the festival table**

The cultural role of Marsi rice extends beyond nutrition and price. FAO's profile discusses its traditional use in festivals including Dashain and Tihar. Such practices give the grain meaning within family and religious life. They also make it more than a commodity that can be substituted without consequence.

Jumla's mountain food traditions encompass beans, barley, millet and other crops. A highland meal draws from a landscape where each harvest depends on local growing conditions. Foods that elsewhere are presented as gourmet novelties may be ordinary ingredients tied to work, weather and household decisions.

The word 'heritage' can be helpful when it calls attention to crops and knowledge overlooked by commercial supply chains. It becomes less useful when a product's cultural identity is used as a premium label but the people who grow it capture only a small fraction of the premium.

The authenticity of the story should be tested at the farm gate.

## **A new stage in Rome**

On 5 October 2026, FAO Nepal announced a showcase of agrifood products and innovations at the World Food Forum, held in Rome from 8 to 16 October. Its stated product list includes Jumli Marsi rice, Jumli beans, millet varieties, mountain barley, highland potatoes, walnuts, black sesame and other heritage foods.

The announcement is significant because it presents traditional crops alongside innovations, value-added products and agricultural knowledge rather than treating them solely as curiosities.

It does not, however, prove that every showcased item has won a new export contract or entered a profitable global retail channel. An exhibition is an opportunity for relationships and discovery; export success requires repeat orders, certification where applicable, logistics, shelf-life controls and margins that justify the costs.

To claim that Jumla has already conquered international markets would confuse an aspiration with a commercial result.

## **The overlooked economics of the grain**

A product can command a high retail price while leaving farmers with little extra income. Between a field and a distant consumer sit transport, sorting, storage, milling, packaging, distribution,

marketing and possible losses.

In Jumla, the geography makes that sequence especially consequential. A delayed route can affect delivery reliability. Poor storage can undermine quality. Inconsistent grading can make it difficult for buyers to trust each package. The ability to establish origin and avoid mislabelling may be as valuable as a persuasive story.

For smallholders, producing more is not always the only answer. Higher yields without profitable demand may depress prices. Conversely, seeking premium markets without stable production and credible quality assurance can lead to disappointed buyers.

A serious business case asks what portion of the selling price reaches farmers and what investments are needed to raise that share.

## **When a label becomes a tool**

FAO's Mountain Partnership Products initiative offers an instructive example. It uses narrative labels to communicate the origin, production methods and cultural meaning of mountain products. Its reporting on producers in Nepal describes efforts to improve market access for heritage rice, mixed beans and other mountain foods.

A label alone cannot guarantee a fair price. It becomes useful when buyers can trace a product, recognise legitimate producer groups and understand why it differs from an unverified alternative. The same system needs quality controls and institutional trust or it risks becoming an attractive wrapper around uncertain claims.

The strongest commercial identity is built with farmers rather than written for them by distant marketers.

Particular producer success stories are valuable but should not be treated as representative of all of Jumla. Markets differ across crops, seasons and organisations. What worked for a cooperative selling beans may not translate directly to rice or millet.

## **Why women farmers matter**

FAO's profile of the Jumla Organic Group records significant participation by women in the smallholder network associated with Marsi rice. That detail deserves more attention than a stock image of women harvesting grain.

Agricultural livelihoods are affected by access to land, financial services, labour, technology and the ability to participate in decisions about pricing and distribution. Women's labour may be central even when formal ownership and business recognition are less visible.

A meaningful value chain should allow producers to influence quality standards, understand costs and receive transparent payment. Training that benefits only middlemen or a marketing campaign that ignores unpaid farm work would be a limited form of development.

The future of heritage crops depends on whether the people doing the difficult work can regard farming as a viable livelihood.

## **Conservation is not a museum project**

The phrase 'saving ancient grains' can suggest that conservation means locking a seed in a collection and refusing change. In reality, living agricultural diversity depends on farmers continuing to grow crops because they have cultural, practical and economic value.

Climate variability, labour shortages and changing diets may make that continuation difficult. Different crops can play different roles in climate resilience; a general claim that all traditional grains will thrive under future climate conditions would be scientifically unjustified.

Careful research into varietal performance, soil health, irrigation and pest management is therefore consistent with protecting heritage. A farmer who experiments with improved processing or better distribution is not necessarily abandoning tradition. They may be increasing the chance that the crop survives.

Agricultural policy has to connect biodiversity with income, not pretend the two will always reinforce each other automatically.

## **What international interest should lead to**

For Jumla, the most valuable result of global attention would not be a temporary surge in glamorous photographs. It would be dependable buyers, honest traceability, investment in storage and processing, and more bargaining power for producers.

For consumers, that might mean accepting that a mountain product cannot always compete with mass-produced rice on price, while demanding evidence for claims of origin and quality. For policymakers, it means supporting infrastructure and producer organisations rather than relying on promotional events alone.

There is room for companies, cooperatives, researchers and diaspora buyers to participate. But the objective should be measured where the crop is grown.

When a bowl of Marsi rice is served far from Karnali, it carries a landscape and a history. That may help explain why someone buys it. It does not tell us what the farmer earned.

The future of Nepal's heritage grains will be decided by the answer to that second question.

*Reporting note: The October 2026 World Food Forum participation is a planned showcase at the publication date, not a*

*claimed record of completed export sales. FAO case studies are identified as institutional reporting, not original interviews.*

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