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Malana

“First Season”

By Frenchy Cannoli

Photos by @himalayan_connection @himalayan_escape

In the Northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, perched at 8,701 feet (2,652 meters) in the Himalayan mountain range, at the entrance of a small valley tucked between the Kullu and the Parvati valleys is a small village called Malana. Despite its remoteness, Malana is known the world over for the quality of its hand-rubbed cannabis resin (charas), known as Malana cream. When I visited the area opposite, this little valley was peppered with small cultivated cannabis gardens and wild plants. At that time, it was a relatively well-kept secret, known only to old timers and connoisseurs of quality charas.

I was excessively lucky in my first year in the Parvati valley; sharing the camp of a Frenchman who had spent 15 years in those valleys. His knowledge was endless, and I absorbed as much as I could during three weeks of what could be described as an intense private schooling in hand-rubbed live resin making.

The diversity in cannabis plants that was shown to me was flabbergasting. It was my first experience with the resin bounty of the Himalayan Cannabis terroir; two facts became obvious from the beginning:

Charas made with wild cannabis in the Parvati valley and Malana charas made from cultivated plants had no equal.

My subsequent seasons in this region of the Himalayas would be guided by this knowledge.

During my second season, I was determined to go back to the villages of Tosh and Nakthan to make some Parvati jungle charas but I also wanted to discover Malana and, since the wild cannabis, called "jungle" reached its peak maturity earlier than cultivated plants, I would be able to make jungle at the end of the Parvati valley during the last weeks of September before heading for Malana where I would work cultivated fields until the first snows in late November early December. I wanted to rent some fields as far as possible from the village to be away from the most restrictive aspects of living around a higher caste community which include not touching any of the houses, common buildings, people or animals at any time.

I was on a mad rush to get to the end of the Parvati Valley and the wild cannabis territory for a spell of total solitude, which was all I wanted after a sojourn in Tokyo, but I needed to take care of provisions and logistics first and for that I had to go to Manali in the Kullu valley. Manali was still a small village on the road to Ladakh in the 80s but already a popular tourist destination, the perfect place to take care of shopping and get the latest news before heading for Nagar, a hamlet I stayed at during the previous season and where I had a friend, Toumi. Toumi was French, and looked like a Hobbit straight out of Tolkien. He was living in Nagar, and was the only person I knew who would willingly share months in the wilderness of the Malana valley collecting resin, and more importantly had the ability to negotiate renting cultivated cannabis fields from the local owners at the very end of the summer pasture, in a magical place called Waichin.

He would go to Malana through the Chanderkhani, a pass at over 12,000 feet (3660 m), lock down some fields for us, set-



up camp and enjoy the ripest plants while I was away. I would find him when I was done in the Parvati.

I took the bus to Manikaran, walked to the end of the valley and spent two weeks like a hermit roaming high over the villages of Tosh and Nakthan, making charas with wild cannabis plants, before I headed down the valley to join Toumi in the Malana valley. I stopped overnight in Pulga, a small village on my way, and spent the night smoking and





talking chillums with an Italian chillum-maker by the name of Renzo, who was baking a series of chillums he had just finished.

The quality of your charas and of your chillum defines the respect that is given to you when you travel in India. Charas made from wild cannabis plants near the villages of Tosh, Nakthan and Kir Ganga in the Parvati Valley is the ultimate proof of belonging. The "crème de la crème" of jungle charas is a very rare commodity and sharing such a smoke creates a deep relationship between total strangers overnight. Renzo gifted me a chillum in the morning, warm from the coals, an object of elegance and perfection, made of three different types of clay polished to a mirror-like gleam, a dream to smoke. I had no idea who Renzo was when I left in the morning however I was shortly educated profusely on the subject by a group of Italians I shared a chillum with a few hours later in Manikaran.

A Renzo chillum should have been a trophy unattainable to a newcomer like myself and the way I was looked over and questioned at first was obviously from a position of distrust. Once I explained that I had received the chillum from an Italian in Pulga by the name of Renzo that very morning, they were so obviously shocked by the event that I started to wonder what the back story was.

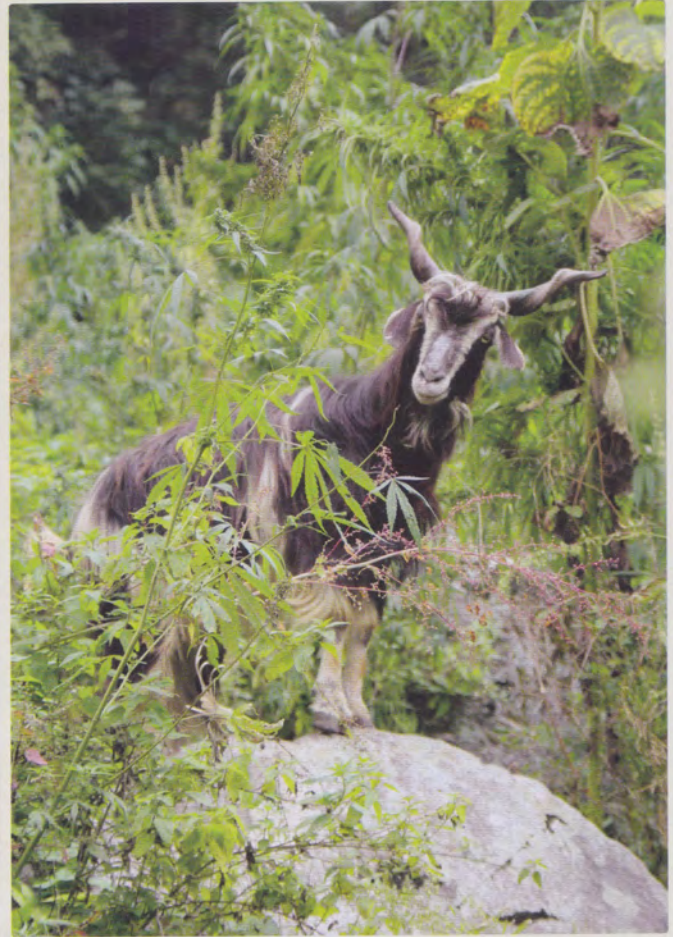
Renzo was simply the most respected chillum maker in India, a dedicated and talented craftsman who fashioned clay treasures that were coveted by all connoisseurs, the waiting list was long and exclusive. This incredible gift was part of my life for most of the eight years I spend in India.

I now had a two-day walk in front of me with as many supplies

as I could possibly carry without breaking my back. Once I reached Malana it wasn't hard to follow Toumi's steps to the little shack he had built for us at the very end of the valley, a small cave with a roof extension of pine branches over a tarp and a wide fireplace the length of the habitat, a small, cozy and warm headquarters perched over cannabis fields that were to become ours on a longer-term basis than I originally thought. The word idyllic would describe perfectly the setting, eternal snow on the mountains in the background, a surrealistic palette of autumn colors surrounding us, a river running nearby, a pair of eagles playing over us and all the cannabis plants we could handle until the first snow.

It was almost perfect but for the plants in the fields! My first experience in Tosh the past season had been in a field of semi-wild plants, three-to-five-foot single flower plants offering a nice diversity of phenotypes, and colors, or working with wild plants that are the pure expression of their habitat expressing different terpene profiles and characteristics depending mostly on the vegetation surrounding them. I was not as appreciative as I should have been of the big dark green pine tree style plants of the gardens we rented. The little-to-no diversity offered was my biggest concern. Furthermore, it is not as easy or convenient to process a nine-foot tall plant as it is a three-to-five-foot tall one when all you want to do is caress lightly the flowers to collect the resin.

The magic of Waichin was nonetheless in those plants. The ground is lightly tilled and seeded ahead of the rainy season. That is all it takes to cultivate cannabis in the Himalayas, even at 9,000 feet. The land is powerful and rich, the climate is tropical hot during the day and high mountain cold at night, the genetic is unique and thrives in these extreme climatic conditions, the rarefied air and the more intense UV rays. The



resin produced is abundant, powerful, pungent, and extremely sticky, a pure delight to collect on the palm of your hands. The uniformity of the plants was in fact mostly appearance, the diversity existed but resided in the terpene profile expressed by each, and every one of the plants. I needed to get close to discover the potential of these fields.

My first season in Waichin was an otherworldly experience - the primal feeling of collecting resin on my hands day after day in the most breathtaking and isolated valley I had ever been to added to the daily adventure of living in the wilderness of the Himalayan mountains with the most basic equipment. It was beyond exhilarating. We stayed close to three months in Waichin, it was peaceful and intense, beautiful and harsh, physically and mentally extremely demanding and rewarding, a heady combination that proved to be very addictive.

Waichin is the last summer pasture of the valley, a two-hour walk from the Malana which makes human relations very different, and caste system formalities were not as stringent. A handful of locals would come daily to make charas in the neighboring fields. We were their first and main customers; we would share chillums while we waited over a tea for the dew on the fields to dry under the morning sun and at the end of the day before they headed home to their village. We had a very unique relationship by the end of the season.

We had friends in Malana, which is a rare and precious gift. They thought we were crazy and funny. We were also good customers which made us welcome, but behind our backs they were actually betting on how long we would last. The day we beat the bet that had been put on our ability to survive, they brought us a wild pheasant and some fresh vegetables and cooked a whole meal for us. They could not share the food because it had been cooked in our pots however such a gesture was an amazing gift of acceptance and friendship.

I started to plan the next season with our local friends a few weeks later. There is no place in the whole wide world I wanted to be from September to December at any given coming year in my life until the end of time. I was so in love with the valley, the people, the Charas, the whole survivalist type experience that nothing else could compare, ever.

The plan was simple, let the plants revert back to their wild state, so we just let the goats in the garden to do the composting when we were done collecting the resin, the seeds would spend the winter under thirty feet of snow like wild cannabis and hopefully thrive. We rented the fields for the next season, and took the road back to civilization through the Chanderkani pass before the first snow.

I will share more of my most memorable adventures in Malana in the next issue to conclude this series.

Frenchy Cannoli is a consultant, educator and writer in the Cannabis industry with special focus on hash making using traditional methods. Frenchy can be reached through his website at: www.frenchycannoli.com or seen on Instagram @frenchycannoli.