

# The European market potential for dates

In the long term, the European market for dates is expected to show stable growth. This growth is likely to be driven by changes in the consumption patterns of European consumers. This includes the rising interest in healthy snacking and sugar replacement. Another driving force would be consumption by a large number of immigrants who are arriving in Europe. Many of them regularly consume dates. France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands offer the most opportunities for developing country suppliers.

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## 1. Product description

Dates are the fruit of the date palm tree (*Phoenix dactylifera*). Depending on the fruit's maturity, dates are referred to as fresh or dried. Fresh dates (usually with a moisture content of >50%) are rarely sold on the European market. The season for fresh dates is very short in producing countries, and only a few varieties are appropriate for eating at this stage. Therefore, this study will only discuss the European market for dried dates (sometimes called 'table dates').

When left on the tree, dates will ripen, change colour, soften and reduce in size, weight and moisture content, but increase in sugar content. When picked early to avoid damage by rain, insects or other factors, dates may need to be additionally ripened after harvest. After harvesting and cleaning, dates are protected from insects through fumigation, commonly rehydrated for better softness, sterilised by being exposed to higher temperatures, sorted into grades by quality and size and stored in a cool atmosphere.

Dates can be produced without any treatment after harvesting, those dates are called natural dates. Dates can also undergo treatment after harvesting, including rehydration and coating with glucose syrup or sorbitol. Those dates are called conditioned dates.

Dates can be produced with a lower (<30%) moisture content or a higher (<60%) moisture content. Dates with a higher moisture content need to be stored at a temperature between 0 and 4°C. Even when dry, dates are often stored in frozen form to prolong shelf life. Generally, a frozen cold chain is then maintained during transport and further storage. For the retail shelves, processed dates will be offered at ambient or fridge temperature.

Dates are normally used as a final product (a fruit snack) for consumers, but they are also used as an ingredient in home cooking and in bakery products, confectionery and other food manufacturing industries. If dates are consumed as a snack, they are generally used whole, either with pits (stones) inside or pitted (destoned). They can also be chopped and used as an ingredient in, for example, mueslis or dried fruit mixtures. In addition, dates can be processed further into products, such as [date paste](#), [date juice \(syrup\)](#) and liquid [date sugar](#). Even the pits can be used to produce oil and coffee substitutes.

Most of the world's date production is concentrated in the subtropical climate of North Africa and the Middle East. The harvesting season extends from July to late November, depending on the variety. However, the main harvest starts in September. The world date production is increasing at a steady rate, and it reached more than 1.1 million tonnes in 2019. Saudi Arabia is the leading producer of dates, with a 20% share of the world's production. It is followed by Iran (15%), the United Arab Emirates (12%), Tunisia (11%), Egypt (11%) and Algeria (9%).

More than 3000 date cultivars are grown worldwide. They are generally classified into two categories: [cane sugar varieties](#) and [invert sugar varieties](#). In most varieties, the sugar content is almost entirely of the inverted form (glucose or fructose), but a few varieties contain cane sugar (sucrose). The two cultivars are distinguished by their popularity on the world market: Medjool (invert sugar variety) and Deglet Nour (cane sugar variety). Medjool dates are particularly popular, representing around 25% of the total world exports.

Picture 1: Medjool dates



Source: Flickr

Picture 2: Deglet Nour dates



Source: Wikimedia Commons

This study covers general information regarding the date market in Europe, which is of interest to producers in developing countries. For statistical analysis, the following combined nomenclature code is used:

Combined Nomenclature Number	Product
08041000	fresh or dried dates

Production statistics mentioned in the study cover dates statistics of dried dates that have been packaged and presented for sale as such (approximately 15% of global raw date production).

## 2. What makes Europe an interesting market for dates?

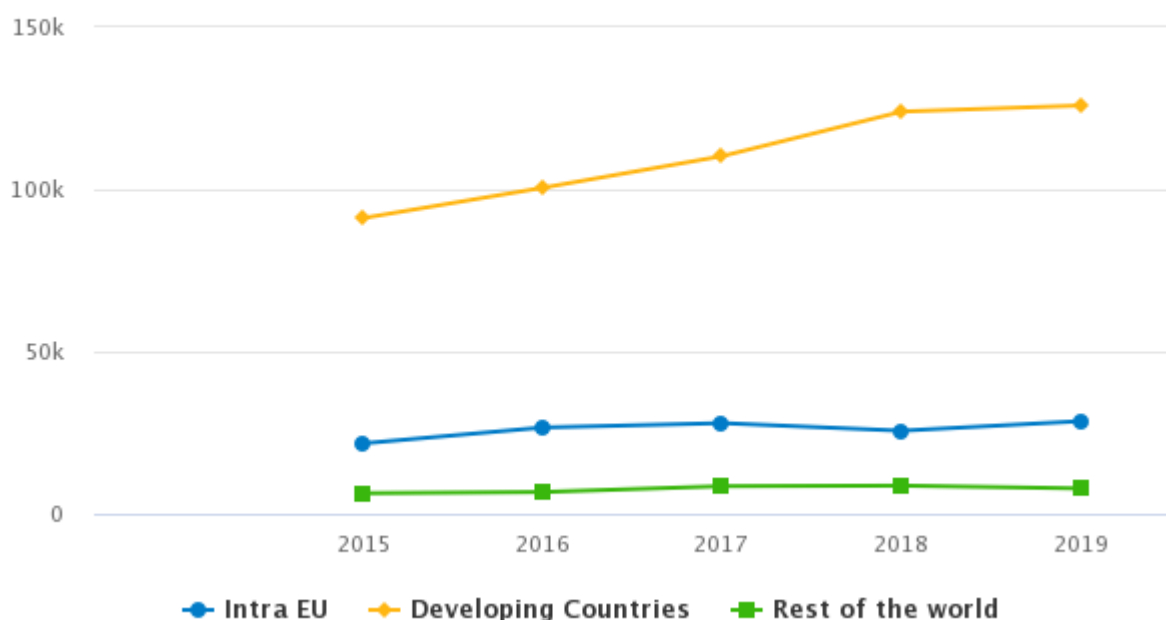
Although Europe is not the largest import market for dates, Europe is the fastest-growing importing region in the world. Europe increased its world import share from 10% in 2015 to more than 16% in 2019. Total European

date imports reached 162 thousand tonnes in 2019, good for a value of €405 million.

More than 85% of imported dates in Europe come from developing countries. Internal European trade consists of simple re-exporting of imported dates, but a significant part consists of added-value trade, including operations such as retail packing. European imports from developing countries increased over the last 5 years, from 91 thousand tonnes in 2015 to 126 thousand tonnes in 2019. The current increase and the expected increase of imported quantities offer good opportunities for developing country suppliers.

Table dates are not produced in Europe, so the demand fully depends on import. Some small quantities are produced in Spain, but they are all sold as fresh in local markets. In the next five years, the European market for dates is likely to increase with an annual growth rate of 7-10%. The high import growth rate is forecasted because of the higher demand for natural sweeteners which can be alternatives for sugar. Together with the import of table dates, import of date syrup and date paste is likely to increase too.

**Figure 1: European import of dates (in tonnes), by origin**



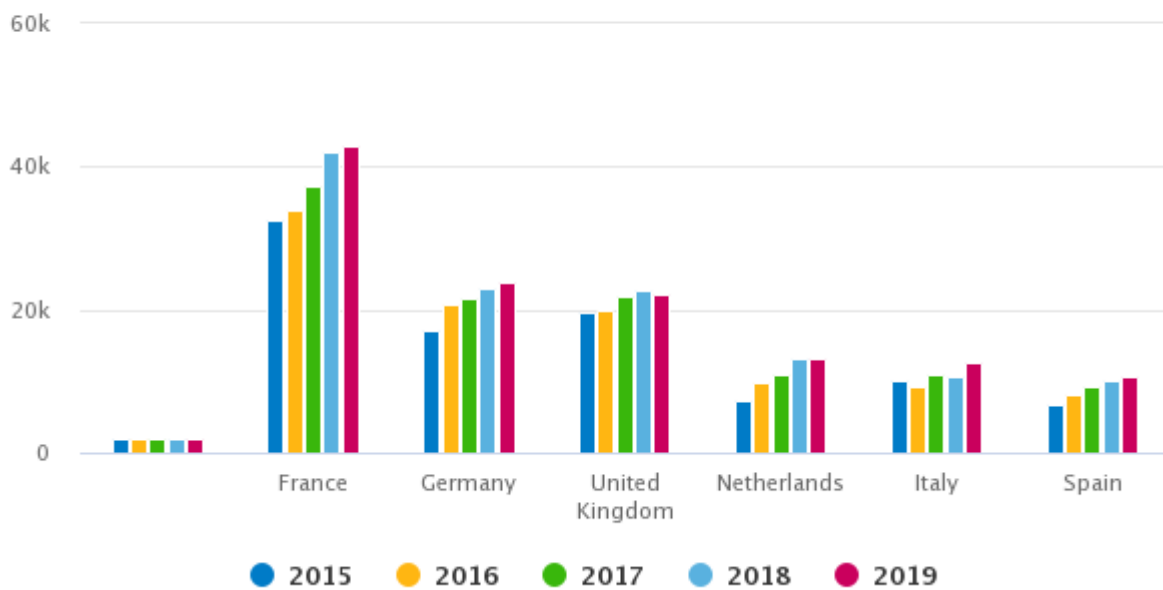
Source: Eurostat

The European market for dates is moderately concentrated. Three countries have a share of more than 50% of total imports. France was the leading importer in Europe (26% import share) in 2019, followed by Germany (15%), the United Kingdom (14%), the Netherlands and Italy (8% each). According to the International Nuts and Dried Fruit Council, the largest dates-consuming country in Europe is France, with 22 thousand tonnes in 2019. One of the important reasons for France's large consumption is its large share of diaspora from North African date producing countries. Per capita consumption in Europe is largest in the Netherlands, with an average consumption of 0.6 kg/year per person.

The coronavirus outbreak in 2019 [affected the European food market, including dates](#). This mainly influenced the market structure. Sales through the food service segment decreased due to closure of restaurants and hotels. On the other hand, retail sales and home delivery sales increased. Import volumes and regular import procedures were not influenced by the pandemic, and Europe continued to increasingly import dates and date products.

Figure 2: Leading importers of dates in Europe

in tonnes



Source: Eurostat and national statistics

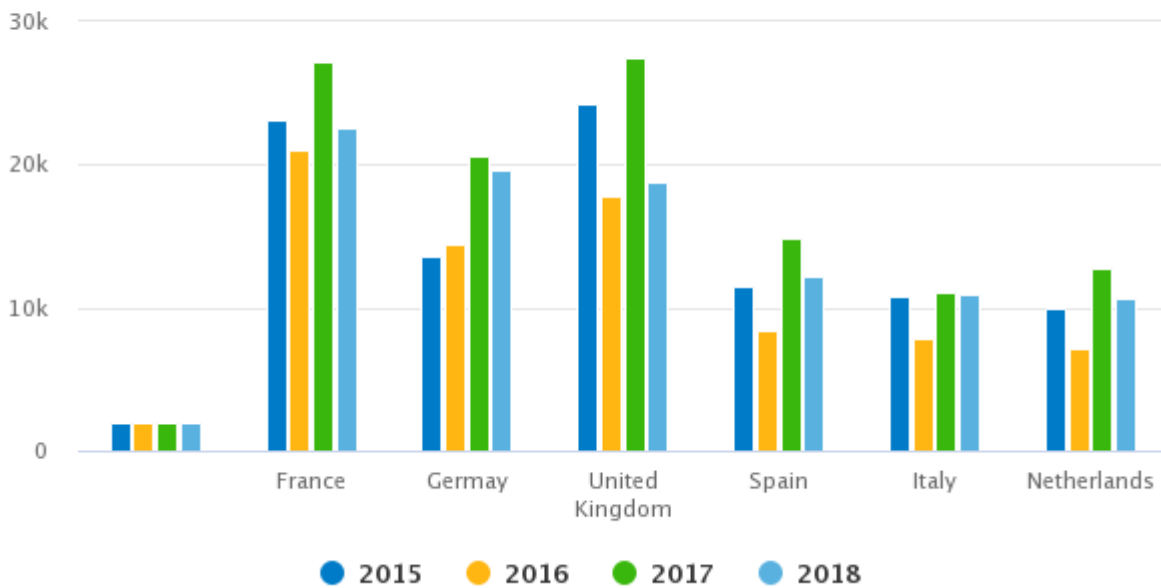
### 3. Which European countries offer most opportunities for dates?

The main importers of dates in Europe are also the leading consumers: France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Figure 3 represents apparent consumption. These data also include industrial consumption. As produced quantities vary between the years, there may be a wrong perception of constantly fluctuating demand. In reality, demand is stable and increasing, which is clearly evident from the constantly increasing retail sales of dates.

France, Germany and the United Kingdom are the largest European markets for dates, representing more than 50% of the European market. Over the last five years, a high import growth rate was noted in the Netherlands, Spain and Italy too. Therefore, all six countries offer a lot of opportunities for emerging suppliers of dates to Europe. Other countries with a high increase in imports include Poland (16% annual growth rate since 2015), the Czech Republic (17%) and Greece (24%).

Figure 3: Leading consumers of dates in Europe

in tonnes



Source: International Nuts and Dried Fruit Council (INC)

### France: the leading European market for dates

France is the largest importer of dates in Europe, representing around 25% of the European market. French date imports steadily increased over the last 5 years, reaching 43 thousand tonnes and a value of €85 million in 2019. Of this quantity, around 97% accounted for imports from developing countries, with Israel as the only significant supplier from the rest of the world (2.4 thousand tonnes), followed by the United States with around 100 tonnes. In 2019, France exported 15 thousand tonnes of dates, meaning that domestic consumption is estimated at 27 thousand tonnes.

In 2019, France imported 46% of its dates from Algeria, followed by Tunisia (43%) and Israel (6%). France is the only European country for which Algeria is the leading date supplier. This is explained by the well-established trade relationship and historical background between the two countries and their shared language (French). Apart from the three leading suppliers, no other country has a market share of more than 1% in France. Emerging suppliers with a relatively small, but increasing export to France include Palestine, Turkey, Jordan and Iran.

Most dates in France (perhaps more than 70%) are sold through retail channels. The remaining 30% are sold to the industry and food service. The date variety that is imported and consumed most in France is Deglet Nour, but the number of varieties is increasing. Dates are consumed throughout the year, but the highest consumption is found during winter months, especially at the end of the year. Also, consumption is higher among the Muslim population during Ramadan.

Large quantities of dates are also sold under private labels (brands of the retail chains) such as [Carrefour](#) (Carrefour, Carrefour Bio and Petit Prix labels), [Leclerc](#) (Couleurs Vives label), Super U (U label), [Intermarché](#) (Paquito label) and [Auchan](#) (Auchan, Mmm and Bio). Independent brands include [La Favorite](#) and [Sun](#) (by Color Foods), [Holy Fruits](#) (by Mondial Fruits Secs), [Brousse](#) (by Brousse Vergez), [Daco Bello](#) (by Daco France) and [Maître Prunille](#). Brands of producers are also present on the market. In some shops, dates are sold unbranded by weight.

Ethical sourcing and sourcing of organic dates is also developing in France. Examples of companies and date importers sourcing ethically include [Agro Sourcing](#) and [Direct Producteurs Fruits Secs](#).

French brands usually promote a date cultivar (most commonly Deglet Nour or Medjool) and sometimes the origin (most often Algeria or Tunisia). Promoting the origin of the dates means that Tunisia and Algeria are recognised as quality suppliers to France. The most frequent size of retail packs is 500 g, but many other sizes are available. All supermarket brands (private labels) in France have started to use [Nutri-score](#) to label dates. Dates are usually labelled 'B' or sometimes 'A', depending on sugar content.

Picture 3: Brousse branched dates



Source: Carrefour

Picture 4: Dates paste (La Favorite brand)



Source: Amazon France

## Germany: the European importer with a large organic market

German imports of dates increased over the last five years with an average annual growth rate of 9%. In 2019, German date imports reached 24 thousand tonnes and a value of €61 million. Germany also exported more than 8 thousand tonnes, leaving around 16 thousand tonnes for domestic consumption. German per capita consumption of dates is 2.4 kg/year.

In 2019, Germany imported 45% of its dates from Tunisia, followed by Pakistan and Algeria (12% each). Other suppliers with increasing exports to Germany are Iran and Israel. The highest increase in imports is noted for Pakistan. German imports of dates from Pakistan increased from 1.7 thousand tonnes in 2015 to almost 3



thousand tonnes in 2019. Other emerging suppliers include the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Palestine and Jordan.

Germany is a particularly attractive market for organic dates, as the country is the [largest European market for organic food](#). Most organic dates sold in Germany are imported from Tunisia. The use of dates as an ingredient is also increasing in the organic segment. Some organic products containing dates in Germany include fruit bars (for example, [Lubs](#), [Hej](#), [Alnatura](#) and [Lebepur](#)), baby purees (for example, Swiss brand [Holle](#)), fruit snacks (for example, [DM](#) and [Lycka](#)) and breakfast porridge mixtures (for example, [Stark](#), [Hammermühle](#) and Austrian [Verival](#)).

Significant quantities of dates in Germany are sold under private labels, including labels like Alesto (by discounter chain [Lidl](#)), Trader Joe's (by [Aldi Süd](#) and [Aldi Nord](#)), ja! (by [REWE](#)) and Edeka and Ediba Bio (by [Edeka](#)). Examples of independent brands are [Seeberger](#), [Farmer's Snack](#) and [Kluth](#). A large share of organic dates is sold under private label brands of specialised organic retailers, such as [Denn's](#), [DM](#) and [Alnatura](#). There are also independent organic brands, such as [Rapunzel](#), [Clasen Bio](#) and [Morgenland](#).

Picture 5: Example of a date brand in Germany (Seeberger)



Source: Seeberger

Picture 6: Example of a date syrup in Germany



Source: Alnatura

## The United Kingdom: opportunities for emerging suppliers

In 2019, the United Kingdom imported 22 thousand tonnes of dates, with a value of €57 million. Most imported dates are consumed within the country. There is a relatively small percentage of re-export. Consumption of dates in the United Kingdom is estimated to have been around 20 thousand tonnes in 2019. This was an increase of 2 thousand tonnes compared to 2018. Per capita consumption in 2019 was 0.28 kg/year.

The import market structure in the United Kingdom is quite specific and different from other leading European markets. In 2019, the United Kingdom imported dates from Pakistan (29%), Israel (12%), Iran (10%) and Tunisia (9%). The second-largest European supplier, Algeria, has a market share of only 1%. The United Kingdom is the only European country for which Pakistan is the leading date supplier. This is explained by the large Pakistani-born population in the United Kingdom. They established trade relationships with Pakistan.

Another characteristic of date imports in the United Kingdom is the presence of a large number of importers which are importing smaller quantities. In 2019, more than 200 different companies were importing dates in the United Kingdom. Many suppliers specialise in the ethnic segment and sell dates to specialised ethnic shops. Examples of ethnic suppliers and importers include [Fudco](#), [Afak Trading](#), [Al Haramain Dates](#), [Damascgate](#), [Golden Saffron](#), [Organic UK](#), [Sahara UK Foods](#) and [WG Buchanan](#).

The large market shares are captured by the private labels of retail chains such as [Tesco](#), [Sainsbury's](#), [ASDA](#) and [Morrisons](#). A leading independent brand is [Whitworths](#). The presence of other brands (aside from private labels) is relatively small and includes brands such as [Crazy Jack](#), [Wholefoods](#) and [Tree of Life](#). Some exporters are successfully selling their own brands, such as Hadiklaim from Israel (Jordan river brand) and Siafa International from Saudi Arabia (Madina brand). The French cooperative Maître Prunille also sells the Eat Me brand in the UK.

In the United Kingdom, dates are increasingly used as an ingredient in fruit snacks without added sugar. In those products, dates or date paste is used to provide sweetness. Many fruit bar snacks with dates were launched in the last several years. Some examples include [Get Buzzing](#), [Nakd](#), [Trek](#), [Good](#) and [Deliciously Ella](#).

The market in the United Kingdom offers specific opportunities for suppliers of Fairtrade-certified dates, as the



country is home to one of the largest Fairtrade products markets in Europe. Currently, there are around 5,000 Fairtrade-certified products on sale in the United Kingdom.

## **Spain: significant increase of import**

Spanish date imports show a significant increase, with an annual growth rate of 12%. Spain's date imports increased from 6.7 thousand tonnes in 2015 to more than 10 thousand tonnes in 2019, good for €32 million. Spanish date consumption is estimated to have been around 9 thousand tonnes in 2019. Per capita consumption is around 0.26 kg/year.

In 2019, Spain imported 34% of its dates from Tunisia, followed by Algeria (28%) and Israel (18%). Large quantities (1.6 thousand tonnes) were imported from France through re-export. Some of those re-exported quantities were packed by France-based retailers and sold in Spain. Algeria was gaining most of the market share in Spain, increasing supply from 700 tonnes in 2015 to almost 3 thousand tonnes in 2019.

Dates are mostly sold by private labels of Spanish retail chains such as [Mercadona](#) (Hacendado label), [Carrefour](#), [Lidl](#) (Alesto label), [Alcampo](#) (Auchan label), [Eroski](#), [Dia](#) and [Aldi](#). Examples of independent brands are [El Monaguillo](#) (by Bernabe Biosca Alimentacion, produced in Tunisia), Casa Pons (by [Importaco](#), sold in Mercadona), [Frumesa](#), [Borges](#), [Fernández](#) and [Campomar](#) (organic). Also, some quantities are sold unbranded by weight.

## **Italy: supply dominated by Tunisia**

In 2019, Italy imported 12.6 thousand tonnes of dates for a value of €33 million. Around 1.3 thousand tonnes were re-exported, leaving around 11 thousand tonnes for domestic consumption. According to INC, per capita consumption of dates in Italy is estimated at 0.18 kg/year. Imports of dates to Italy show a strong seasonal pattern. Italy imports more than 50% of its dates in the last quarter of the year, reaching a peak in November. This is explained by the increased use of dates during the winter holidays in Italy. More dried fruits, including dates, are generally eaten during winter holidays such as New Year's Eve and Christmas.

Italy imports more than two-thirds of its dates from Tunisia. In 2019, Italy imported 66% of its dates from Tunisia, followed by Pakistan and Israel (10% each). Similarly to Spain, Italy imports some quantities via re-export from France, because of the presence of France-based retailers. French retailers pack dried fruits in France, including dates, and then export the products to Italy. Algeria is present on the Italian market with a 3% share of direct exports. Emerging suppliers are Palestine, Iran and Egypt.

Sales are dominated by private supermarket labels, such as Coop, Conad and Carrefour. Independent brands include Fatina (by Murano), [Ventura](#), [Noberasco](#) and [Life](#). Sales of organic dates in Italy are increasing. The variety that is sold the most is Deglet Nour, with Tunisia as the main origin. Several retail brands present the name of the date cultivar on the retail label (Medjool or Deglet Nour). A specific characteristic of the Italian retail segment is the small packaging of 60 g, which is sold in shops for a value of €1 (€0.99).

## **The Netherlands: re-exporter of dates**

Date imports to the Netherlands have been increasing at an average annual rate of 15% since 2015. Imports reached 13.1 thousand tonnes and a value of €46.9 million in 2019. Although the Netherlands imports more dates than Italy and Spain, consumption is relatively small, as the majority of dates are re-exported. In 2019, the Netherlands re-exported more than 8 thousand tonnes of dates, leaving less than 5 thousand tonnes for domestic consumption.

The Netherlands is the only European country for which Israel is the leading supplier. In 2019, the Netherlands imported 29% of its dates from Israel, followed by Tunisia (12%), France (11%) and Iran (10%). Israel is also increasing its export volumes, by three times since 2015, from 1.3 thousand tonnes to 3.8 thousand tonnes. The leading market for dates re-exported from the Netherlands is Germany, followed by France.

The majority of dates in the Netherlands are sold under private labels. The leading retail chains selling dates under their own label in the Netherlands include [Albert Heijn](#) (AH label), [Aldi](#) (Trader Joe's label), [Jumbo](#) (Jumbo label) and [Lidl](#) (Alesto label). Large Medjool dates are sometimes packed in more luxurious packaging. Several brands are sold under the labels of producers, especially in ethnic shops. One of the leading organic brands for dates is [Smaakt Bio](#), but organic dates are also packed and sold under private labels.

### Tips:

Contact the [French Association for Dried Fruit](#) (SNFC) to learn more about the French market for dates.

Consider investing in French-speaking staff to more easily penetrate the French market if you are not from a French-speaking country.

Find German date traders on the websites of the specialised German Association, [Waren-Verein](#), and in the [German company directory](#), Wer liefert was.

Stay up to date with the date market in the United Kingdom through the [National Dried Fruit Trade Association UK](#).

Stay informed about the Italian market through the specialised portal [Italiafruit](#) (in Italian only).

## 4. Which trends offer opportunities on the European dates market?

The increasing demand for healthy snacking and sugar replacement alternatives, combined with product innovation, is the driving force behind the growing consumer interest in dates in Europe. Also, sustainable and ethical production is becoming an important aspect for European traders and consumers.

### Sugar replacement

Sugar consumption is [decreasing in Europe](#). Dates are one of the sweetest fruits, containing only naturally occurring sugars. As such, dates and date products are increasingly used as a sugar replacement. Innovative fruit snacks and other products containing dates very often use [clean and clear label](#) claims such as: refined sugar free, no added sugar, reduced sugar and low sugar. Dates also add flavour and colour, replacing the need for artificial additives, thus creating a clear ingredient label.

Dates are used in home cooking, to give natural sweetness to products such as smoothies, shakes, healthy snacks and other dishes. Industrial users increasingly use date products as a sugar replacement, including date paste or date syrup (concentrated date juice). Some companies use the popularity of vegan food as an opportunity to promote dates as a vegan sugar replacement. As honey is produced by bees, it is not vegan.

Producers and exporters of dates are also spreading their offer by introducing new products, aside from date syrup and date paste. A good example of a producing company that offers several innovative products is the Egyptian company [ElWadi](#). It produces date chocolate spread, date sugar and date powder.

### Healthy snacking for athletes

A major trend that is in line with increased consumption of dried fruit, including dates, is healthy snacking. Consumers are searching for healthier alternatives to snack between meals, or for snacks that can replace meals. Younger consumers who are taking more care of their health and wellness no longer favour sweets such as candies or chocolate snacks but switch to protein bars and other low-sugar alternatives. As a result, dried fruit (together with nuts) is becoming increasingly popular as snack.

However, dates are not considered light snacks, because they are rich in carbohydrates. Depending on the variety, they contain between 45% and 80% sugar. Sugar from dates has a low glycaemic index, which means it will be digested slowly, keeping energy levels even throughout the day. Slow release of energy ensures athletes have enough strength to perform well during their activity. Because of that, they are used as snacks during sports performances by some leading athletes (for example, tennis players).

## Innovative products based on dates

Innovative fruit snacks and other products increasingly use dates as an ingredient. During [ANUGA 2019](#) in Cologne (leading food exhibition), a lot of new products with dates as an ingredient (see table below) were presented.

Table 1: Innovative products presented at Anuga 2019

Category	Description/Product examples
Fruit bars with dates	<p>The popularity of fruit bars in Europe has increased over the last few years. The natural sweetener function of dried fruit allows sweet products to be made without added sugar. Dates and date paste are often used in fruit bars because of their sweetness.</p> <p>Some examples are <a href="#">Raw-Bite</a> (Denmark), <a href="#">Nakd</a> (the United Kingdom), <a href="#">VeganZ</a> (Germany) and <a href="#">PharminD</a> (Czech Republic).</p>
Breakfast cereals with dates	<p>Many breakfast cereals use added sugar to give sweetness to muesli, granola and other products. As consumers are searching for no-added-sugar alternatives, some breakfast cereal producers have started to use dates in product compositions.</p> <p>Examples include <a href="#">Dorset Cereals</a> (the United Kingdom), <a href="#">Verival</a> (Austria), <a href="#">Risenta</a> (Sweden), <a href="#">Charles Vignon</a> (France) and <a href="#">LeSillon</a> (France).</p>
Sugar-free spreads with dates	<p>These are used as an alternative to traditional, sugar-rich jams and marmalades.</p> <p>An example of an innovative company in this field is the company <a href="#">Soua Soua</a> (France), which produces spreads from Algerian dates. Aside from spreads, Soua Soua produces other innovative products, such as fermented milk with dates.</p>

## Sustainability and ethical production

Consumers and retailers are increasingly interested in sustainably produced fruit products, including dates. Read more about these trends in the [CBI processed fruit and vegetables trends study](#).

Some companies that focus on ethical production source their products from a specific country and support producers through specific projects. A couple of ethical sourcing projects have been launched in Palestine. Examples include the [Unicop](#) project from Florence, Italy and Zaytoun in the United Kingdom. Both projects support the selling of Palestinian Medjool dates. Another example is the [Date project](#) (by SKT Welfare from the United Kingdom). This project collects funds to support the welfare of families in Syria and Palestine. For each box of dates sold, funds are given to Syria and Palestine as humanitarian aid.

### Tips:

Promote dates as healthy and nutritious on the European market. Explore creative ways to use dates in home cooking and offer ideas through online promotion. For inspiration, you can use examples of the [California Dates Association](#), which offers a list of recipes using dates as an ingredient.


Monitor industry trends and product innovations on leading European food trade fairs such as [Anuga](#), [SIAL](#) and [Food Ingredients Europe](#).


Read our study about [Trends on the European Processed Fruit and Vegetables Market](#) to find out more about general trends.


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