

Entering the European market for dates

Food safety certification, combined with reliable and frequent laboratory tests, creates a positive image for date exporters to Europe. Sustainable production and implementation of corporate social responsibility standards will provide additional advantages for emerging suppliers. Tunisia and Algeria are the leading competitors for dates in Europe. Although Medjool and Deglet Nour dates have the strongest presence in Europe, emerging suppliers such as Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are offering new tasty varieties, and they are gaining share on the European market.

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1. What requirements must dates comply with to be allowed on the European market?

What are mandatory requirements?

All foods, including dates, sold in the European Union must be safe. This also applies to imported products. Additives must be approved. Levels of harmful contaminants, such as pesticide residues and mycotoxins, must be limited.

Contaminants control in dates

The [European Commission Regulation](#) sets maximum levels for certain contaminants in food products. This regulation is frequently updated, and apart from the limits set for general foodstuffs, there are a number of specific contaminant limits for specific products, including dates. The most common requirements regarding contaminants in dates are related to pesticide residues, microbiological organisms, foreign bodies (such as insects), preservatives and food additives.

Contamination with insects

Contamination with insects seems to be one of the biggest issues for dates on the European market. The main pest affecting dates is the carob moth (*Ectomyelois ceratoniae*), which develops inside the fruit and continues its growth upon arrival at the packaging plant and during storage. During 2019, there were two official registered cases of dates withdrawal from the European market because of the presence of insects.

Preventive measures after harvesting are recommended. Currently, fumigation with phosphine or CO₂ is the preferred way to control insect development in stored dates. Methyl bromide as a fumigant is banned in the European Union. Temperature treatments are also used to prevent insect development. Adult insects and eggs die if exposed to temperatures above 50°C for long enough. Cold storage can also be used to prevent infestation in places where insects are likely to be present in ordinary storage.

Pesticides Residues

The European Union has set maximum residue levels (MRLs) for pesticides in and on food products. Products containing more pesticide residues than allowed will be withdrawn from the European market. The majority of European importers will request a detailed test on the presence of a large number of pesticides (sometimes more than 500). The European Union regularly publishes [a list of approved pesticides](#) that are authorised for use in the European Union. This list is frequently updated.

Microbiological contaminants

The presence of aerobic bacteria and/or yeasts and moulds is an important cause of microbiological

contamination of dates. Dates are also susceptible to infection by aflatoxins after the fruits ripen and soften, providing a suitable environment for aflatoxin production. The standard procedure before exporting includes laboratory testing of dates for the presence of pathogenic microorganisms such as yeasts, moulds, *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, coliforms and *Staphylococcus*.

Product composition

European authorities can reject products if they have undeclared or unauthorised extraneous materials or if the levels of these materials are too high. Although European consumers prefer dates without any additives, glucose syrup, sugars, flour (usually in chopped dates) and vegetable oils can be optional ingredients in date production. If any of those ingredients is used, it must be declared in the ingredients list, as well as in the product description. If a preservative is used (such as potassium sorbate), the quantity used must be declared too.

Quality requirements

Quality of dates is determined by the allowed percentage of defective produce, by total number of fruits. The industry has defined several criteria for quality, but some of them, such as taste and flavour, are subjective and cannot be easily determined by physical characteristics.

Specific quality standards for dates have not been officially defined by the European Union. The most common standards used are the standards published by the [United Nations Economic Commission for Europe](#) (UNECE) and by the [Codex Alimentarius](#).

The basic quality requirements for dates are:

- Absence of: insects, damages, moulds, fermentation and foreign smell or taste;
- Moisture content: maximum of 26% for cane sugar varieties and 30% for invert sugar varieties. However, for Deglet Nour dates in their natural state, the maximum moisture content is 30%;
- Presentation: separated into individual fruits (pitted or unpitted), clusters (dates with the main bunch stem attached) and stems (stems that are separated from the rachis, with the fruit attached naturally). Dates can be chopped, too;
- Additional ingredients: must be clearly indicated. Dates are often produced without any additions, but some producers use preservatives, usually potassium sorbate or coatings such as glycosyl syrup or vegetable oil.

Specific marketing requirements include:

- Classification: dates are classified into three classes: Extra Class, Class I and Class II;

Sizing: size classification is optional. Dates can be classified into three categories, according to the number of dates per 500 grams.

Packaging requirements

In bulk packaging, dates are typically packed into carton boxes with a polythene liner inside. Bulk packages usually weigh 5 kg but sometimes weigh 10 kg. For retail packaging, smaller carton boxes or plastic trays are most common. The size of retail packaging varies between 250 g and 1 kg. Dates can be packed pressed (to better fit into containers), unpressed (without mechanical force) and in clusters (with the main bunch stem attached). Some producers pack dates in retail packaging together with a plastic stick that resembles a central stem.

Dried dates can be stored at ambient temperature for some time, but they are best stored refrigerated at 4-10°C. At temperatures higher than 25°C, the syrup or date honey may seep out of the packaging. The shelf life of dates varies per cultivar. For example, the Medjool variety has a shorter shelf life than the Deglet Nour variety. As mentioned, wholesalers often store dates in frozen form. Shelf life can also be prolonged if dates are vacuum packed in an inert atmosphere.

The content of the packaging must correspond with the indicated quantity (in weight or volume) on the label. Importers will check size and weight to ensure that pre-packed products are within the [limits of tolerable errors](#).

Labelling requirements

The label should indicate the name of the product ('dates' or 'dates coated with glucose syrup'), the name and physical address of the packer, the dates style (cluster, stems, pitted where appropriate), the country of origin and the class. It is common practice to put the name of the variety, the crop year and the best-before date on the label. When dates undergo thermal treatment (hydration and drying), they are commonly declared as processed or conditioned dates. Without these treatments, dates are declared natural dates.

In the case of retail packaging, product labelling must comply with the [European Union Regulation on the provision of food information to consumers](#). This regulation defines nutrition labelling, origin labelling, allergen labelling and minimum font size for mandatory information. Dates are not declared as an allergen. However, sulphites must be indicated as potential allergens if they are used as preservatives. Retail packs must be labelled in a language that can easily be understood by consumers in the European target country, so generally in the country's official language. This explains why European products often carry multiple languages on the label.

In addition to this regulation from 1 April 2020, all food in retail packs in Europe must be labelled with the [indication of origin](#). For example, if dates are packed in the Netherlands, packaging still needs to indicate the origin of dried grapes. This can be done by indicating a country (e.g. Tunisia), by indicating non-EU'' or by declaring dates do not originate from the Netherlands'.

Specifically related to sourcing of products from Israel, there was a decision in 2019 by the [European court of justice](#) that European Union countries must identify products made in Israeli settlements on their labels. In the statement by the court, it is explained that indicating that goods originate in the state of Israel, as opposed to occupied territory, could mislead consumers about the fact that Israel "is present in the territories concerned as an occupying power and not as a sovereign entity".

Tips:

Be sure to perform laboratory tests only in [ISO/IEC 17025:2005](#)-accredited laboratories.

Review your treatment practices to ensure your dates do not contain pesticide residues above the set limits.

Store your dates in proper conditions (low humidity, cool temperatures) during and after production to avoid appearance of moulds and mycotoxins.

Refer to the [Codex Alimentarius](#) for practical guidelines on how to meet the requirements of European food safety legislation. For dates, consult the Code of Hygienic Practice for Dried Fruits.

What additional requirements do buyers often have?

Together with the mandatory requirements, many private requests have become equally important. These include compliance with food safety, quality and sustainability standards.

Food safety certification

Although food safety certification is not obligatory under European legislation, it has become a must for almost all European food importers. Most established European importers will not work with you if you cannot provide some type of food safety certification.

The majority of European buyers will ask for certification that is recognised by the [Global Food Safety Initiative](#) (GFSI). For dates, the most popular certification programmes (all recognised by GFSI) are:

- [International Featured Standards](#) (IFS);
- [British Retail Consortium Global Standards](#) (BRCGS);
- [Food Safety System Certification](#) (FSSC 22000).

Please note that this list is not exhaustive and that food certification systems are constantly developing.

Although different food safety certification systems are based on similar principles, some buyers may prefer one specific management system. For example, British buyers often require BRC, while IFS is more common for German retailers. Also, note that food safety certification is only a basis to start exporting to Europe. Serious buyers will usually visit/audit your production facilities within one or a few years.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Companies have different requirements for corporate social responsibility. Some companies require adherence to their code of conduct or common standards such as the Supplier Ethical Data Exchange ([SEDEX](#)), Ethical Trading Initiative ([ETI](#)) or Business Social Compliance Initiative code of conduct ([BSCI](#)). If dates are meant for the retail segment, suppliers will have to follow a specific code of conduct developed by retailers. Many retailers have their own code of conduct. Examples are [Lidl](#), [Rewe](#), [Carrefour](#), [Tesco](#) and [Ahold Delhaize](#).

Tips:

Get food safety certification. Carefully select a certifying company and consult with your preferred buyers about their certification preferences.

Do a self-assessment through the producer starter kit from the [amfori BSCI website](#).

What are the requirements for niche markets?

Organic dates

To market dates as organic in Europe, dates must be grown using organic production methods, according to [European legislation](#). Growing and processing facilities must be audited by an accredited certifier before exporters can put the European Union's organic logo on the packaging, as well as the logo of the standard holder (for example, [Soil Association](#) in the United Kingdom and [Naturland](#) in Germany). A specific niche opportunity to sell organic dates at higher prices is to follow the rules of the biodynamic certification of [Demeter](#).

Importing organic products to Europe is only possible with an [electronic certificate](#) of inspection (e-COI). Each batch of organic products imported into the European Union has to be accompanied by an electronic certificate of inspection as defined in Annex V of the Regulation [defining imports of organic products from third countries](#). This electronic certificate of inspection has to be generated via the [Trade Control and Expert System](#) (TRACES).

Sustainability certification

Sustainability is a broad term with many aspects, and there is still no worldwide recognised sustainability certification covering all aspects. One increasingly used aspect is to publish CO2 emission rates on products, but it is difficult to have reliable measuring for those claims. In date production, the most important sustainability issue is economical and smart usage of water. Currently, the most famous certification schemes focus on environmental impact and ethical aspects.

Fairtrade is the most famous ethical certification worldwide. In the date sector, it is mostly used by Tunisian and Egyptian producers. Currently (May 2020), eight Tunisian and two Egyptian cooperatives and companies are [Fairtrade certified](#). Products carrying the Fairtrade label indicate that producers are paid a Fairtrade Minimum Price. Fairtrade International has a [minimum price structure](#) for dates from Tunisia and Egypt.

Ethnic certification

Islamic dietary laws (Halal) and Jewish dietary laws (Kosher) propose specific restrictions in diets. If you want to focus on Jewish or Islamic ethnic niche markets, you should consider the implementation of [Halal](#) or [Kosher](#) certification schemes. Dates are an especially popular product for the ethnic populations mentioned above, so ethnic certification will positively influence your sales in Europe.

Tips:

Read our study on [Trends on the European Processed Fruit and Vegetables Market](#) for an overview of the developments of the sustainability initiatives in the European market.

Stay up to date on new sustainable initiatives and innovations through participation in the [Khalifa International Award for Date Palm and Agricultural Innovation](#) in the United Arab Emirates.

Consult the [Sustainability Map database](#) for information on a wide range of sustainability labels and standards.

Check the [guidelines for imports of organic products into the European Union](#) to familiarise yourself with the requirements of the European organic market.

2. Through what channels can you get dates on the European market?

How is the end market segmented?

In Europe, dates are mostly used for home consumption, so retail sales have the largest share. They are increasingly used by the food processing industry and by food service. The food processing industry is also increasingly using date products such as date paste, date sugar and date syrup. There are no exact data, but the retail segment is roughly estimated to make up a 60% share of the European date market. Within the retail segment, dates are mostly sold in supermarkets but also in specialised shops such as ethnic and organic shops.

Figure 1: End-market segments for dates and date products in Europe



Source: Autentika Global

Retail (snack segment)

Retailers sometimes buy directly from developing country exporters, but in the majority of cases, dates are supplied via intermediaries such as specialised distributors. A recent development is the polarisation of the retail sector into discounters and high-level segments. Consolidation, market saturation, strong competition and low prices are key characteristics of the European retail food market. Currently, online retail sales of dates account for a small share of the market, but this share is increasing, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several types of subsegments (points of sale) of the European date retail segment include:

- Retail chains – an increasing share of private label dates and the introduction of own organic and more luxury brands (such as small packs with large Medjool dates) are the main developments for the leading mainstream retailers. The companies that hold the largest market shares in Europe are Schwartz Gruppe (Lidl and Kaufland brands), Carrefour, Tesco, Aldi, Edeka, Leclerc, Metro Group, Rewe Group, Auchan, Intermarché and Ahold (Delhaize, Albert Heijn and several other brands);
- Specialised shops – including organic food and ethnic shops. Some organic shops are part of the specialised organic food retail chains, especially in Germany. Organic dates and date products are also sold in drugstores (for example, [dm](#) and [Rossmann](#)) and variety shops (such as [HEMA](#)). Ethnic shops selling food from the Middle East and North Africa provide specific opportunities for entering the market, without competing with the leading retail brands;
- Ethical stores – a niche segment. They provide opportunities for Fairtrade and ethically certified suppliers. Sales of Fairtrade-certified products are strong in the United Kingdom and Scandinavian countries.
- Online retail – often part of the offer of existing retail traders or specialised shops. With the impact of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and lockdown measures imposed in many countries in Europe, online retail orders have dramatically increased during March and April in 2020. It is expected that online sales will continue to be popular after 2020 compared to previous years.

Food industry (ingredient segment)

Food industry processors do not yet use large shares of imported dates and date products. However, it is expected that the food industry will increase its use of dates, because they can be used as an alternative to sugar in many products. The biggest users of dates in the European food industry include:

- Fruit snacks – dates and date paste, as already explained above, are becoming increasingly popular in products such as fruit bars, because they can give sweetness and the desired consistency to products without the addition of sugar. Organic dates and date paste are increasingly used by fruit bar producers, as fruit bars are perceived as healthy food;
- Breakfast cereals – breakfast cereal producers are increasingly switching from using sugar-infused fruit to using natural fruit, such as dates. Chopped dates are used for breakfast cereals, sometimes coated with flour in order to avoid sticking;
- Bakery industry – they use date paste to produce different sweets. Date paste is used as a filling too.
- Date spreads, pastes and syrups – these do not yet have a large presence on the European market, but they are increasingly appearing. Date syrup and date paste are used in combination with other fruit to produce sugar-free jams and spreads.
- Other users – other users of date products include confectionery producers (for example, [chocolate-coated and nut-stuffed dates](#) or [energy balls with dates](#)) and producers of innovative products such as [date butter](#). Date products are also packed as sugar replacements for home use, such as [date powder](#) or [date syrup](#).

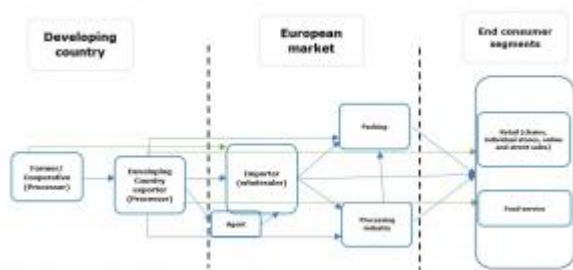
Foodservice

The food service channel (hotels, restaurants and catering) is usually supplied by specialised importers (wholesalers). The food service segment often requires specific packaging of 5 kg of dates, which is different from retail packaging. World cuisines, healthy food and food enjoyment are the major driving forces in the food service channel in Europe. The fastest-growing business types are likely to be new (healthier) fast food, street food, pop-up restaurants and international cuisines.

Through what channels do dates end up on the end-market?

The most important market channel for dates in Europe is represented by specialised dried fruit importers. After importing, dates reach the market segments as described in Picture 8. In some cases, you can also supply the segments directly, without an importer as intermediary. However, specialised importers or wholesalers are usually the first entry point into the European supply chain for exporters of dates from developing countries.

Figure 2: European market channels for dates



Source: Autentika Global

Importers / Wholesalers

In most cases, importers act as wholesalers. They sell dates to packing companies who pack them into consumer packages. Some importers also have processing and packing equipment, so they can supply retail and food service channels directly. However, many important dried fruit brands import dates directly, instead of buying them through specialised bulk importers.

Importers usually have good knowledge of the European market, and they monitor the situation in date producing countries closely. Therefore, they are your preferred contact, as they can inform you in good time about market developments and provide practical advice for your exports. Importers of dates commonly import other types of dried fruit and edible nuts as well, so offering other products in addition to dates can increase your competitiveness. There are also specific types of ethnic date importers specialised in the supply of ethnic shops.

The position of importers and food manufacturers is put under pressure by retail. The higher requirements from the retail industry determine the supply chain dynamics from the top down. This pressure is translated into lower prices but also into added-value aspects such as 'sustainable', 'natural', 'organic', and 'fair trade' products. As a result, transparency is needed in the supply chain. To achieve this, many importers develop their own codes of conduct and build long-lasting relationships with preferred developing country suppliers.

Agent/broker

Agents involved in dates trade typically perform two types of activities. Agents act as independent companies that negotiate on behalf of their clients and as intermediaries between buyers and sellers. For their intermediary services, they typically charge a commission of 2-4% of the sales price. Another type of activity is the supply of private labels for retail chains in Europe. For most developing country suppliers, it is very challenging to participate in the demanding private label tender procedures. For these services, some agents, in cooperation with their date suppliers, participate in procurement procedures put out by the retail chains.

Examples of companies active in different channels for dates in the leading European markets of France, the United Kingdom and Germany include the following:

- Importers and wholesalers: [Soua Soua](#) (France), [Brousse Vergez](#) (France), [Midi Sec](#) (France), [Die Frischebox](#)

- (Germany), [Richard Janssen](#) (Germany), [Chelmer Foods](#) (United Kingdom), [Evolution Foods](#) (United Kingdom), [OrganicUK](#) (United Kingdom) and [Petrow Food](#) (United Kingdom);
- Agents: [Eurobroker](#) (France), [PALM Nuts & More](#) (Germany) and [Kenkko](#) (United Kingdom);
 - Packing companies: [Maître Prunille](#) (France), [Color Foods](#) (France), [Seeberger](#) (Germany), [Maryland](#) (Germany), [Whitworths](#) (United Kingdom) and [The Forest Feast](#) (United Kingdom);
 - Companies selling processed dates: [Alnatura](#) (organic date syrup, breakfast cereals, Germany), [Rapunzel](#) (date syrup, fruit bars, Germany), [Windmills Organics](#) (organic date syrup, breakfast cereals, United Kingdom) and [Meridian Foods](#) (date syrup, United Kingdom).

There are also partnerships between European companies and date exporters. Those partnerships include investments from the European partners, which enable direct sales to Europe without intermediaries. Some examples include [Soua Soua](#) (French partnership with Algerian producer [Amadghagh](#)), [Le Comptoir des Dattes](#) (Tunisian company with French partnership), [Eden Fruits](#) (German partner of Algerian company [Ziban Garden](#)) and [Médi Fruit](#) (Tunisian partnership for organic dates with German company [Tilouche Fruchtimport](#)).

What is the most interesting channel for you?

Specialised importers of dried fruit are your best bet for exporting dates to the European market. This is specifically relevant for new suppliers, as supplying the retail segment directly is very demanding and requires a lot of quality-related and logistical investments. However, for well-equipped and price-competitive producers, packing for private labels can be an option. As the cost of labour in Europe is increasing, importers of dates sometimes search for more cost-effective packing operations, such as in developing countries.

Dates are often pressed before packing, and many European packers do not use pressing equipment that is available in producing countries. This can be used as an opportunity to add value in supply.

Tips:

Study lists of exhibitors for large trade fairs such as [ANUGA](#), [SIAL](#) or [Alimentaria](#) to find potential buyers for your dates. If you aim to supply for private labels of supermarkets, search for opportunities at [PLMA](#).

To reach the food service segment, look for suppliers at specialised food service events such as [SIRHA](#) or [Internorga](#).

Search the list of exhibitors of the specialised trade fair [Fi Europe](#) to find potential buyers for date products such as date paste or date syrup.

Retailers need sustainable products. Make yourself more competitive by investing in different certification schemes related to corporate social responsibility (CSR), organic or food safety, for example. Food safety certification is the minimum requirement if you want to reach the retail segment.

Search through the [members' list](#) of the European Trade Federation for Dried Fruit and Edible Nuts (FRUCOM) to find buyers from different channels and segments.

3. What competition do you face on the European dates market?

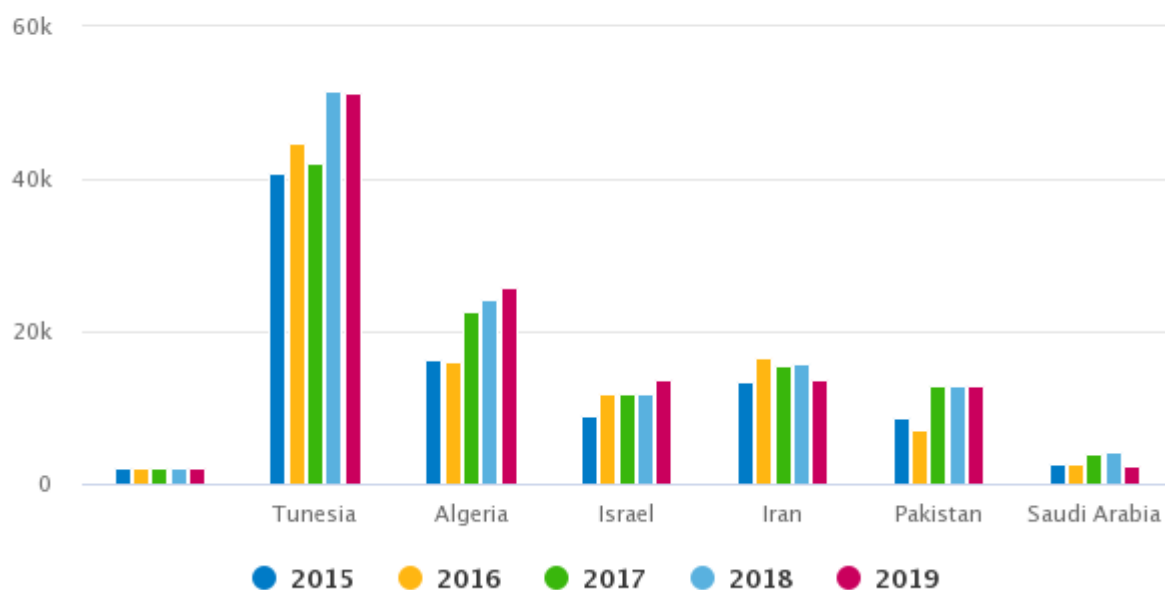
Which countries are you competing with?

The main competitors for emerging date suppliers in Europe are Tunisia and Algeria. Those two countries supply 60% of all dates to Europe. Israel, Iran and Pakistan are three other important competitors, supplying the other 30% of the market. Tunisia is also very strong in the organic segment. Emerging suppliers include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Palestine, the United States of America, Jordan and South Africa. Morocco is a

potential competitor in the Medjool variety, as the country is planting a lot of Medjool palm trees.

Figure 3: Leading suppliers of dates to Europe

in tonnes



Source: ITC TradeMap and Eurostat

Tunisia, leading European supplier of dates

Tunisia is the world's fourth-largest producer of dates. With a production of 120 thousand tonnes, Tunisia produces 11% of the world's dates. Tunisian export of dates is ranked fifth in the world, after Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan and Iran. Although Tunisia has an 8% share in the world's exports, it has a 38% share of the European market. Around 10 thousand tonnes of Tunisian dates are exported as organic.

More than 40% of Tunisian dates are exported to Europe. Morocco is the second-largest market for Tunisian dates. Tunisian exports to Europe increased at an annual rate of 6% and reached 51 thousand tonnes in 2019, good for €106 million. Within Europe, the major target market for Tunisian dates is France (35% in 2019), followed by Germany (19%), Italy (16%), Spain (7%) and Belgium (5%). Germany is the fastest-growing market for Tunisian dates. German imports of dates from Tunisia increased from 6.5 thousand tonnes in 2015 to 10 thousand tonnes in 2019.

Tunisia is home to six million date palm trees. They are concentrated in four oases in the south of Tunisia – in Kébili (67% production share), Tozeur (16%), Gabes (13%) and Gafsa (5%). The harvesting period in Tunisia lasts from the beginning of October until the end of December. Although there are more than 150 date varieties in Tunisia, only 4 varieties are of economic interest: Deglet Nour (with more than two-thirds of all production), Allig, Khouat Allig and Kenta. Deglet Nour is the main exported variety, accounting for more than 80% of all exports.

Algeria, increasing supplier to Europe

Algeria is the world's sixth-largest producer of dates. Its constantly increasing production has reached 100 thousand tonnes in the 2019-2020 season. Algeria is the world's eighth-largest exporter of dates, with exports of more than 40 thousand tonnes. Algeria exports most of its dates to Europe, with France as the main destination, followed by the Russian Federation and Morocco. Deglet Nour represents more than 85% of Algerian date exports.

Algeria is significantly increasing exports to Europe, with an annual growth rate of 12%. Algeria increased date exports to Europe from 16 thousand tonnes in 2015 to 26 thousand tonnes in 2019, worth €40 million. France is the main European destination for Algerian dates, accounting for a 76% export share in 2019, followed by Spain (11%), Belgium (4%) and Germany (4%). Belgium is the fastest-growing market for Algerian dates in Europe. Algerian exports to Belgium increased from 200 tonnes in 2015 to more than 1.1 thousand tonnes in 2019.

Algeria has more than 18 million date palms and is continuously increasing production. Date production in Algeria is concentrated in the south-eastern part of the country. The province of Biskra ranks first in Algerian date production (31%), followed by El Oued (27%) and Ouargla (18%). Around 50% of Algerian dates are of the Deglet Nour variety, followed by Degla Beida and Ghars. Together, they represent almost 90% of Algerian dates.

Israel, a leading Medjool supplier

Israel produces more than 40 thousand tonnes of dates per year and exports around 65% to Europe. The leading date variety is Medjool, with an 80% production share. Other date cultivars grown in Israel include Deglet Nour, Halawi, Hayani, Deri, Ameri, Khadrawi, Barhi and Zahidi. It is estimated that Israel produces 50% of the world's Medjool dates. Almost half of Israeli dates are grown in the Jordan Rift Valley and Arava.

European import of dates from Israel has increased at an annual rate of 12%, reaching almost 14 thousand tonnes in 2019, worth €75 million. The leading European importer of dates from Israel is the Netherlands, accounting for 28% of European imports, followed by the United Kingdom (20%), France (17%), Spain (14%) and Italy (9%). The Netherlands is also the fastest-growing market for Israeli dates. Since 2015, the Netherlands has increased its imports of Israeli dates by three times, from 1.3 thousand tonnes to 3.8 thousand tonnes in 2019.

Iran, the second world table date producer

With an average production of 150 thousand tonnes, Iran is the second-largest producer and exporter of dates in the world. Still, less than 5% of exported quantities reach Europe. The main export destinations for Iranian dates are Asian countries: India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Afghanistan. European imports of dates fluctuated over the last years. In 2019, they reached a quantity of 13 thousand tonnes and a value of €18 million. The most produced variety is Sayer, approximately 50 thousand tonnes annually.

The United Kingdom accounts for 16% of European imports from Iran, followed by Denmark (15%), Poland (13%), Germany (11%) and the Netherlands (9%). Iran is the leading European date supplier to several European countries, including Sweden, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. Iranian dates are price competitive, and average prices are usually lower than those from other origins.

Most dates are cultivated in southern Iran. There are more than 400 date varieties in Iran, but the one that is exported most is Sayer (40%). Sayer is also frequently used for cutting or further processing. The very sweet Mozafati date is the leading exported snack variety, followed by Zahedy, Shahany, Kabkab, Estameran and Piarome. Although Iran is famous for its price competitiveness, the Iranian variety 'Piarom' is one of the most expansive varieties in the world. Piarom, known as the 'chocolate date', is considered to be one of the most delicious semi-dry dates.

Pakistan, the leading supplier of the United Kingdom

With an average export volume of around 150 thousand tonnes, Pakistan is ranked as the fourth-largest exporter of dates in the world. Pakistan exports almost 90% of its dates to India. More than 90% of the dates are produced in the Sindh and Balochistan provinces. There are more than 160 date cultivars in the country. The leading Pakistani cultivars are Aseel, Dhakki, Begum Jangi, Rabai and Muzawati.

Over the last five years, Pakistan has continuously increased its date exports to Europe, reaching 13 thousand tonnes and a value of €11.8 million in 2019. The United Kingdom is the leading European importer of dates from Pakistan, accounting for 50% of European imports. Other European importers of Pakistani dates include

Germany (22%), Italy (7%) and Denmark (7%). The Netherlands is the fastest-growing importer from Pakistan, having increased its imports from 40 tonnes in 2015 to 260 tonnes in 2019.

Saudi Arabia, the leading world producer of dates

With a 5-year average production of 220 thousand tonnes, Saudi Arabia is the largest date producer in the world. Although it is the largest producer, Saudi Arabia is not the leading exporter, because the majority of the produced dates are consumed within the country. Saudi Arabia consumes approximately 80% of its produced dates, leaving the remaining 20% for export. Yemen and the United Arab Emirates are the leading export markets. In 2019, Saudi Arabia exported 182 thousand tonnes of dates to these countries.

Only 2% of Saudi's dates reach the European Union. Nevertheless, European imports of dates from Saudi Arabia are increasing and reached 3.4 thousand tonnes in 2019, good for €6.7 million. The United Kingdom is the largest European market for Saudi Arabian dates (50% of European imports). Other important export destinations for dates from Saudi Arabia include the Netherlands (15%), Germany (10%), Sweden (9%) and Belgium (5%).

There are more than 400 date palm varieties in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh, Qassim, the Eastern Province and Medina are the largest date producing areas. Alwain, Khudry, Sukkary, Sagei, Albrni, Kholas and Al-Safawi are the most important cultivars.

Which companies are you competing with?

Most date exporters are processors and packers. Some companies have their own plantations, but the majority buy dates from farmers through specialised collectors. The examples listed below are illustrations of the leading date exporters. Many other prospective companies are not mentioned in this study. Direct competitors are different for each exporter and cannot be generalised. For example, exporters of Deglet Nour, Medjool or Sayer varieties are targeting different market segments and therefore do not compete directly.

Companies in Tunisia

Producers of dates in Tunisia are switching from traditional oases, where several different varieties were grown, to modern oases with Deglet Nour as the only variety. The current supply chain of dates is organised by approximately 60 thousand (mostly small) farmers, 400 collectors and around 70 packers and exporters. Most collectors purchase 50-300 tonnes of dates and transfer them to packers. Most storage capacities are located in the south of Tunisia, with Kébili and Tozeur as leading centres with a total capacity of around 100 thousand tonnes.

- [Boudjebel](#) S.A. VACPA (Valorization and Packaging of the Agricultural Product) is the leading exporter of dates in Tunisia. It is the world's leading exporter of Deglet Nour dates, with annual exports of 13 thousand tonnes (of which 6 thousand tonnes are organic). It has included more than 600 farmers in its vertical integration programme. More than 100 farmers have Fairtrade (Max Havelaar) certification. Besides its several food safety certificates, Boudjebel has its own ISO 17025-accredited laboratory for quality control.
- [Nouri&Cie](#) is a date packing and exporting company with more than 800 employees. The company exports around 6 thousand tonnes annually and has 2 conditioning facilities and a large storage facility with a capacity of 13 thousand tonnes. Nouri owns its own palm farms in the south of Tunisia. The company exports dates to many different markets, but the export is focused on Asia, especially India and South East Asian countries with large Muslim populations.
- [Horchani Dates](#) is part of the Horchani Group. It has 750 employees and a long tradition in date production. It produces 1.3 thousand tonnes of dates and exports 3.5 thousand tonnes every year. Half of the exported dates are Deglet Nour and the other half are Alig, Kouat and Alig Kenta. It has the largest processing facility in Tozeur, which can process 10 thousand tonnes per year. Horchani is one of the pioneers in organic date production in Tunisia, currently exporting more than 400 organic dates.

These three companies are notable examples of exporters in Tunisia. Due to the limitations of this study, it is

not possible to describe all exporting companies (more than 70). Examples of other exporters include [Cap Bon Frigorifique Plus](#), [Beni Ghreb](#), [Rose de Sable](#), [Golden Agriproduct](#), [House of Dates](#), [Datcha Dates](#) and [Biosca Tamara](#).

In order to promote the export of Tunisian fruit, including dates, Tunisian companies have formed the association [Groupement Interprofessionnel des Fruits \(GiFruits\)](#). Also, to improve the competitiveness of the date sector in Tunisia, [Pole of Djérid](#) (private public partnership) has established the [Dates and Palms Cluster](#).

Companies in Algeria

In Algeria, there are almost 40 private date processing factories with different capacities. The majority of these facilities are concentrated in the Biskra province, especially in the Tolga municipality. Biskra has around 30 private conditioning and packaging factories. In addition to this, there are more than 150 storage facilities for dates in Algeria. Conditioning of dates in Algeria usually does not include coating in glyucose syrup, as Algerian dates are prized for their high sweetness.

- [Haddoud Salim](#) – one of the largest date processors in Algeria, established 30 years ago. The company processes around six thousand tonnes of dates per year. It exports dates to several countries but aims to increase its presence in the United Kingdom and become the leading supplier there. The company sells dates through the Barari Group, a company which trades dates from several different origins;
- [EURL Boukellal Mohammed Tahar](#) – annually processes five thousand tonnes of dates. It has formed its own brand – Prestige Dates. It is ISO 22000, BRC and IFS certified, which enables it to reach markets and clients with different demands, including European retailers such as Tesco or Carrefour. Apart from the European Union, Boukellal supplies some of the leading retail chains in the Russian Federation.

Other examples of date exporters in Algeria include [EURL Boukellal Mohammed Tahar](#), [Ziban Garden](#), [Tolga Agrofood](#), [Afridat](#), [Biodattes](#), [Sed Oasis](#) and [Mokaddem Fouzi](#). Several important date processors in Algeria still do not have websites (or use Facebook for promotion). Examples are SARL Agrodatt, Lakhder Hlimet ETS, Kistrane Import Export EURL, [Sud Datte](#), [Ouadah Toumour](#), [Datol Export](#) and [Sodapal](#).

Companies in Israel

The largest export of dates in Israel is organised by the Israel Date Growers' Cooperative, also known as [Hadiklaim](#). Hadiklaim is responsible for 50% of the dates distributed in Israel. Hadiklaim operates 16 packing stations. The company exports dates to over 30 countries but mostly to Europe. Hadiklaim sells dates under its own brands (such as 'Jordan River'), as well as under private labels of retail chains such as Tesco, Waitrose, Migros and Albert Heijn. In 2018, Hadiklaim established a subsidiary in the Netherlands – [Palm Fruits BV](#).

Other important date producers and exporters in Israel include [Carmel Agrexco](#), [Mehadrin](#), [Agrifood Marketing](#), [Galilee Export](#) and [Kibbutz Samar](#).

Examples of date exporters from other supplying countries

- Iran – Iran is home to many date exporting companies. Some notable exporters are [Crystal Dates](#), [Sun Export](#), [Sajad Dates](#), [Nakhl Sabz Sobhi](#), [Parsun Day](#), [Pariz Dates](#), [Aban Arya](#), [AHT](#), [Arat Company](#), [Ario](#), [Global Shokraneh Salamat](#), [Tropical Sunshine Green Palm](#), [Middle East Product Export](#) and [Pariz Nuts](#);
- Pakistan – the leading date exporter in Pakistan is [Gilano Dates](#). Other important exporters include [Wisdom Industries](#), [New Lal Shahbaz Traders](#), [Taj Foods](#) and [Asia Foods International](#);
- Saudi Arabia – the largest individual date palm farm in the world is the Saudi Arabian [Alaseel](#), with more than 250 thousand palm trees. Other exporters include [Al Mohamaida Dates](#), [Aneesah](#), [Rayana Dates](#), [Kingdom Dates](#), [Onaizah Dates](#), [Al Khammash Dates Factory](#), [Amal Al Khair](#), [Riyad Dates Factory](#) and [Barakath Al Medinah](#).

Tips:

To learn more about the Tunisian date industry, check the website of the Tunisian [Dates Technical Centre](#).

Visit leading European trade fairs like [ANUGA](#), [SIAL](#), [Fruit Logistica](#) or [Biofach](#) to meet your competitors.

Which products are you competing with?

The main product competition for dried fruit, including dates, is fresh fruit. European consumers have become increasingly health conscious and prefer a healthy diet with an increased consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. This trend can influence the consumption of all dried fruit, especially if it is coated with glucose syrup or sorbitol. The strong competition from fresh fruits will remain a major challenge for the European date market in the coming years.

Marketing competition from the fresh sector includes claims about sugar levels in dried fruit and the risk of dried fruit for dental health, since they stick to consumers' teeth. However, the International Council for Nut and Dried Fruit counters the competition with information claiming there is [unconvincing evidence](#) of too high levels of sugar in dried fruit.

Tip:

Read CBI's [Fresh Fruit and Vegetables studies](#) to better understand the competition from fresh fruit.

4. What are the prices for dates on the European market?

Calculating margins according to final retail prices for dates is not very reliable, as the entire sector has varying prices for different varieties, origins and packaging. For example, Medjool dates normally reach higher prices than Deglet Nour or Mazafati. Also, average export prices from individual countries give information which may be misleading. For example, the average export price of dates from Iran is around €1 (ExWorks). But this information does not tell you anything about the real prices, as the price for Sayer dates may well be below €1, while the export price of Iranian Piarome dates can go over €4.

Retail prices in most European supermarkets vary between €6 and €10/kg for small packs of 100 g of dates with pits. Cost, insurance and freight (CIF) prices of dates represent approximately 20% of the retail price of a small retail package. In cases where a final retail product is sold directly to retail chains, that share is much higher.

If you add value to your produce through differentiated quality, food safety, certification and processing steps, your prices will be higher. For example, organic and fair trade certification may add value to your products.

Figure 4: Average export prices of pitted Sayer dates from Iran on the UK market, GBP/t



Source: IEGVu

The price breakdown given below is a very rough indication. There are many factors contributing to the price, like quality, variety, origin, food safety certification costs, consultants, social security, taxes, sales and network margins.


Table 1: Dates retail price breakdown, price per kg


Steps in the export process	Type of price	Price breakdown	Example (Deglet Nour)
Production of dates	Farmer price	15%	€0.60
Collectors price	Collectors fee	16%	€0.65
Processing and packing of dates	Factory price	25%	€1
Storing, handling and shipping	CIF price	50%	€2
Selling to retail	Wholesale price (incl. value-added tax)	75%	€3
Retail sales of the final packed product	Retail price	100%	€4


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