CBI Buyer Requirements:
Spices and herbs in Europe
Introduction

The European spices and herbs market has strict requirements on food safety and quality. In addition, non-legal requirements related to sustainability are becoming more important for suppliers in developing countries.

What legal requirements must my product comply with?

When exporting to Europe, you must comply with the following legally binding requirements:

Food safety: traceability, hygiene and control

Food safety is a key issue in European Union food legislation.

The General Food Law is the legislative framework regulation for food safety in the European Union.

To guarantee food safety and to allow appropriate action in cases of unsafe food, your spices and herbs must increasingly be traceable throughout the supply chain, and risks of contamination must be limited. This means you should be more and more aware of where your products come from and provide information and keep records.

An important aspect to control food safety hazards is defining critical control points (HACCP) by implementing food management principles.

Tips:

- Have a look at the Quality Minima Document of the European Spice Association (ESA). This is the leading document for the most important European buyers. It provides an overview of legal requirements and non-legal (e.g. quality, food safety, labelling) requirements.
- European buyers will often ask you to implement a food (safety) management system based on HACCP principles. See below for more information.
- Read more about HACCP on the EU Export Helpdesk website. You can consult the EU Export Helpdesk for a full list of requirements. Select your specific product code under chapter 09.

Control of food imported to the European Union

Your products will be subject to official controls. These controls are carried out to ensure that all foods sold on the European Union market are safe, meaning such foods are in compliance with the requirements applicable to them.

Due to repeated non-compliance, spices and herbs from certain countries (especially Indonesia and India) have been subject to additional and stricter European Union customs controls in recent years. Measures imposed by the European Union include requiring a health certificate and an analytical test report.

Dried spices and herbs are not subject to additional controls at this time. However, due to continuing problems with excessive levels of aflatoxins, pesticides and salmonella contamination, it is likely that controls will become more strict in the future.

Tips:

- Check regularly if there are any increased levels of controls for your product or country. The list of spices and herbs and their supplying countries is updated regularly. Check the website of EUR-Lex for the most recent list (see latest document under Amended by).
- Search in the EU’s Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) database to see examples of withdrawals of spices and herbs from the market and the reasons behind these withdrawals.
- Read more about health control in the EU Export Helpdesk.

Contamination of spices and herbs

Contaminants are substances that may be present as a result of the various stages of growing, processing, packaging, transport or storage. Common forms of contamination are:

Pesticides
The European Union has set maximum residue levels (MRLs) for pesticides in and on food products. Products containing illegal pesticides or more pesticides than allowed will be withdrawn from the European Union market.

Pesticide residues exceeding limits laid down in European Union legislation are not allowed on the European market. A problem for European buyers is that a large share of spice and herb crops worldwide do not comply with European Union limits. This is therefore a very important issue for them. In response, the European spice and herb industry is extensively training suppliers in the safe use of pesticides.

Please note that buyers in several European Union members states use MRLs which are stricter than the MRLs laid down in European Union legislation.

Moreover, most supermarkets have their own standards (codes of practice) regarding pesticides, which are stricter than legislation. If your buyers do business with these supermarkets, they will impose these standards on your products as well.

**Tips:**
- Do not interpret residues or detection limits yourself (e.g. margins of error in testing). Discuss at length with your buyers what levels are acceptable for them.
- You can use the EU MRL database in which all harmonised MRLs can be found. Here you can search for your product or pesticide used, and the database will show the list of MRLs associated to your product or pesticide.
- To reduce pesticide levels, promote integrated pest management (IPM) amongst the farmers you work with. This is an agricultural pest control strategy that uses complementary strategies including good growing practices and chemical management. For more information about Integrated Pest Management see the FAO website.
- Read more about MRLs in the EU Export Helpdesk. You can consult the EU Export Helpdesk for a full list of requirements. Select your specific product code under chapter 09.

**Mycotoxins**

For piper nigrum, capsicums, nutmeg, mace, turmeric, ginger and mixtures containing one or more of these spices mentioned, the maximum level of aflatoxin is between 5.0 μg/kg for aflatoxin B1 and 10 μg/kg for total aflatoxin content (aflatoxins B1, B2, G1 and G2). For the same products, the maximum level of ochratoxin A (OTA) is set at 15 μg/kg.

For capsicum, a limit of 20 μg/kg was determined in 2015. This limit was initially set at 15 μg/kg. However, European research showed that this limit was unrealistic. Unfavourable weather conditions during growth and harvest make it hard to control the level of ochratoxin A.

**Tips:**
- Understand better growing, drying, processing and storage practices to prevent contamination, and discuss these with your suppliers. Valuable sources include the guidelines in the Code of Hygienic Practice for Spices and Dried Aromatic Plants (Codex Alimentarius) and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Spices (IOSTA).
- For information on safe storage and transport of spices and herbs, go to the Transport Information Service website.
- Read more about mycotoxins in the EU Export Helpdesk. You can consult the EU Export Helpdesk for a full list of requirements. Select your specific product code under chapter 09.

**Salmonella**

Recent research shows that 7% of all spices imported into the USA were contaminated with salmonella. In addition, 37 of the 79 countries that were monitored had a salmonella problem, and salmonella was found on basil, black and white pepper, oregano, paprika, chillies (capsicum), coriander, cumin and curry powder. It is therefore a serious and widespread problem, also for European buyers.

There are no specific requirements laid down in European Union legislation for salmonella contamination of spices and herbs, as there are for other products. However, according Article 11 of the General Food Law food products placed on the European Union market must be safe. Food business operators are therefore also testing spices and herbs for salmonella.

Food safety authorities can withdraw spices and herbs from the market or prevent them from entering the European Union when salmonella is found.
Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons

In 2015 new European Union legislation was introduced to set limits for polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). PAHs are chemicals that are formed by the incomplete burning of substances such as coal, oil and gas, garbage and fossil fuels.

PAHs have been found in dried herbs and dried spices due to the application of bad drying practices. Artificial drying with fire, for example, can contaminate a product with PAHs when smoke is mixed with the product.

Traditional smoking and processing methods applied to smoked paprika and cardamom result in high levels of PAHs. However, these products are exempt from the maximum levels. Consumption of these spices is low, so this kind of contamination will not affect the health of consumers.

Irradiation [H4]

To control contamination caused by micro-organisms, viruses, bacteria or insects, irradiation is allowed for use on dried spices and herbs.

Irradiation is less damaging to the taste of spices and herbs than steam sterilisation. However, European consumers do not always accept irradiation. Therefore, the treatment must be agreed between buyer and seller.

European Union legislation requires the irradiated product to be declared at all levels within the food chain, and irradiation is only permitted in EU-approved irradiation plants. In other buying countries (e.g. USA), there are fewer objections against irradiation.

Food additives and adulteration

Some herbs and spices or mixtures thereof may contain colourings, flavourings or sweeteners. There is specific legislation for additives (e.g. colours and thickeners) and flavourings that lists which E-numbers and substances are allowed to be used. Many of the spices and herbs rejected by customs authorities or buyers have undeclared, unauthorised or excessively high limits of extraneous materials (e.g. colourants and flavourings).

Spices and spice blends may not contain added colours. Spices and herbs that contain illegal artificial colourants (azo-dyes Sudan I, tartzaine, butter yellow) are rejected and destroyed by EU customs authorities. Although these may be approved by the food authority in your country, they may not be approved in the EU.
Spices and herbs (especially those ground and crushed) can also be intentionally adulterated with cheaper varieties, salt, sand, synthetic varieties and products with a similar appearance. An important reason for intentional adulteration, which is a serious malpractice, is economic gain. Unintentional adulteration (e.g. spillovers from fertilisers and insects) may also occur.

Food adulteration is an important issue for European buyers. According to a panel of industry experts consulted for this study, this type of food fraud occurs frequently with spices and herbs. The European Union and national governments are becoming stricter in enforcing food fraud monitoring.

**Tips:**
- If you use additives, make sure this is legal and agreed with your buyers. Also make sure to mention these additives in the list of ingredients.
- It is impossible for buyers to test spices and herbs for every possible extraneous material. They therefore tend to refrain from buying processed spices and herbs from outside the EU, or will buy only from suppliers they trust. The burden of proof is with suppliers. You will have to build up a proven track record and provide transparency and references if you are to succeed in this market.
- Read more about food additives, enzymes and flavourings on the website of the European Union.

**Consumer labelling**

Pre-packed spices and herbs sold to consumers must adhere to strict European Union labelling requirements concerning labelling, presentation and advertising of foodstuffs.

The [allergen legislation](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/allergens-in-food-products) states that pre-packed food products should clearly state whether they contain allergens. Spices and herbs or mixtures thereof can contain extraneous material (e.g. gluten, mustard or sesame seeds, milk, nuts – see Annex IIIa) that can cause allergic reactions, and therefore must be labelled as containing allergens.

**Tips:**
- Pay attention to potential cross-contamination within your company or in the supply chain. Cross-contamination might happen when different products are intentionally or unintentionally mixed during harvesting, processing or transport. Watch out especially for contamination with cereals containing gluten, peanuts (ground nuts), nuts, celery, mustard, sesame seeds and products thereof.
- Always inform your buyer when your products contain allergens, even when you are not taking care of final packing. For bulk goods, the list of ingredients should be on the label or in the commercial documents. For more information on consumer labelling refer to the [EU Export Helpdesk](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/eu-exports/ lekker) for a full list of requirements. Select your specific product code under chapter 09.
- Allergen-free spices and herbs can be an interesting niche market. There are already several suppliers that are active in this market, such as Dutch Spices and EHL Ingredients.

**What additional buyer requirements do buyers often have?**

In addition to the legally binding requirements, you should also consider complying with the following non-legal requirements which can be selection criteria for EU buyers.

**Food Safety certification as a guarantee**

As food safety is a top priority in all European Union food sectors, you can expect many players to request extra guarantees from you in the form of certification. Many EU buyers (e.g. traders, food processors and retailers) require the implementation of a (HACCP-based) food safety management system.

The most important food safety management systems in the European Union are:
- BRC
- IFS
- FSSC22000
- SQF
All of the above-mentioned management systems are recognised by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), which means that any of them should be accepted by several major retailers. However, in practice some buyers still have preferences for one specific management system.

**Tips:**
- EU market entry preparation is more likely to include implementing a food safety management system than not, and it is therefore important to familiarise yourself with these systems.
- Before you consider certification according to one of these standards, check which one your (potential) buyer prefers. Different buyers may have different preferences for a certain management system. For example, British retailers often require BRC, while IFS is more commonly required in the rest of Europe.
- Choose a management system that is approved by the Global Food Safety Initiative.
- Have a look at Standards Map for more information on the different Food Safety Management Systems.

**Corporate responsibility**

European buyers (especially those in western and northern European countries) increasingly pay attention to their corporate responsibilities regarding the social and environmental impact of their business. This also affects you as a supplier.

Common requirements are the signing of a supplier’s code of conduct in which you declare that you conduct your business in a responsible way. This means you (and your suppliers) respect local environmental and labour laws, stay away from corruption etc.

Important issues in the spice and herb supply chain are correct use of pesticides, child labour, healthy and safe working conditions and fair payment.

Many European buyers already include the most important issues in their supplier audits. They follow common standards such as:
- SEDEX
- ETI
- BSCI

It is important for you to realise that European companies have different definitions, priorities and ambition levels with respect to corporate social responsibility. There is no single way to address this issue. The actions to be taken may range from signing a code of conduct to ensure compliance with the most important issues, to mapping out and addressing all the relevant concerns in your entire supply chain.

**Tips:**
- Exporters interested in supplying the European market should at least address the most important corporate social responsibility issues. Many buyers are already using this as a selection criterion for new suppliers.
- List relevant issues by using existing standards (e.g. ISO26000) and ask your (potential) buyers what they consider to be the most important issues. Ask if they are willing to provide their supplier audit form. This will provide information on their most important issues.
- You can self-assess to determine to what extent you or the farmers you work with comply with different sustainability standards. See ITC’s Sustainable Spice Initiative Equivalency Tool for more information.
- Read our factsheet about sustainable spices and herbs on the European market for more information about the market and the different trends and developments.

**What are the requirements for niche markets?**

In addition to requirements you have to comply with to be allowed on the European market or to find a buyer, complying with the following requirements could offer you a competitive advantage and make it easier to find a buyer.
Sustainable product certification

There is a growing market for certified products with well-known consumer logos. A price premium needs to be paid for spices and herbs with a certificate of sustainability, to compensate for the certification costs. These premiums are paid in some niche markets, but in large parts of the mainstream market buyers are unwilling to spend more.

It is important to understand that each certification addresses different issues (social, environmental, economic) and serves different niches. Refer to ITC’s Sustainable Spice Initiative Equivalency Tool for an explanation and comparison of sustainability standards.

The most popular sustainability certification systems are:

Organic

Organic spices and herbs are produced and processed by natural techniques (e.g. crop rotation, biological crop protection, green manure and compost).

To market spices and herbs in the European Union as organic, they must be grown using organic production methods which are laid down in European Union legislation. Growing and processing facilities must be audited by an accredited certifier. Traders and/or processors have to be audited to ensure a chain of custody.

Some buyers are prepared to pay more for organic spices and herbs because they believe the cultivation of such products is better for the environment, and that these products are healthier than conventional products. Although relatively small, the market for organic products is still growing in Europe.

New organic legislation is scheduled to be implemented in the European Union by mid-2017. The objective is to simplify the old organic legislation. However, new organic legislation will be a concern for small exporters and producers from developing countries. The completely different meteorological, environmental and structural conditions in these countries will make it hard to comply with rules made for European conditions.

In general, organic regulation and testing is expected to become stricter.

Tips:
- For more information, refer to our study on sustainable spices and herbs in the EU.
- To learn more and stay updated about the new organic legislation, refer to the International Foundation for Organic Agriculture (IFOAM) website.
- Consult the ITC’s Standards Map database to learn more about the different organic standards.

Fair Trade Certification

Spices and herbs traded according fair trade principles ensure a certain price and premium for smallholders. This should help them make a living. Examples include Fairtrade and Fairwild (for spices and herbs collected in the wild).

Although it is growing, the market for fair trade certified spices and herbs is still small. The largest share is sold as spices and herbs in the retail channel. At the moment, the food processing industry, which is largest user of spices and herbs, is not a big buyer of certified spices and herbs.

There is increased cross-over between organic and fair trade. A large share of Fairtrade products are also certified organic.

Fairtrade has different standards depending on the place in the supply chain:
- The Smallholder Producer Standard for Spices and Herbs and Trade Standard for traders and processors.
- The Standard for Herbs and Herbal Teas for Hired Labour is specifically for herbs destined for herbal teas grown by producers with numerous workers (i.e. hired labour).
The Rainforest Alliance standard is a mainstream sustainability scheme in which social as well as environmental issues are addressed. It is fairly new to the spice market.

The Sustainable Spice Initiative (SSI), founded by a consortium of leading players in the European spices market and civil society organisations, has been an important driver behind Rainforest Alliance certification projects in several producing countries.

Although buyers’ interest in Rainforest Alliance is reportedly growing, the volume of spices and herbs that are Rainforest Alliance certified is still low at the moment.

One reason is that food processors (which account for 80% of European sales) are only able to use Rainforest Alliance certified ingredients such as spices and herbs. They cannot certify composite processed food products according to a Rainforest Alliance standard.

In contrast, composite food products with organic and Fairtrade certification are sold on the European market.

Rainforest Alliance certified spices and herbs are therefore hidden ingredients with no added marketing value for food processors. For this reason, buyers are less willing to pay price premiums for Rainforest Alliance certified products.

Self-verification

As mentioned above, many buyers in the mainstream market are not willing to pay the premium for certified spices and herbs. The sector is therefore looking at different ways to address sustainability, while at the same time keeping costs down. Self-verification is one such possibility.

In the self-verification approach, suppliers assess their own compliance with the sustainability code, after some instruction. Self-verification does not require expensive audits, but it does still entail additional costs for suppliers due to the need for more administration, for example. Although lower than for certified products, a premium will still have to be paid. This might still be a barrier for some buyers.

Industry experts expect that the use of such self-verification systems will grow in the coming years. Self-verification is especially relevant in the business-to-business market, like the food processing industry. Certification is not always desired in this segment, but buyers still want to show they comply with sustainability requirements.

The push towards self-verification is currently driven by large players in the sector, such as Unilever and Olam. These companies are able to implement sustainable practices throughout their entire supply chain, linking their name and quality directly to sustainability.

Unilever’s Sustainable Agricultural Code (SAC) and the Olam Livelihood Charter are two examples of self-verification systems that you can download free of charge.

Tip:

- See Unilever’s Implementation Guides for more information on how to use self-verification systems.
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