

SEAFOOD MARKET IN BRIEF

Although official statistics on the Italian fish products sector represent guesswork, it is generally agreed that total catch/production runs around 700,000 tonnes {500,000 tonnes from the Mediterranean, 50,000 tonnes from the ocean fishery and 150,000 tonnes from aquaculture}. Factoring in imports of more than 500,000 tonnes fresh and frozen, and 100,000 tonnes of canned products, minus relatively modest exports, leaves a total domestic consumption of around 1,250,000 tonnes, or just over 22 kilograms per capita per annum. Imported products consist mainly of Mediterranean or similar species {especially crustaceans and molluscs}, and tuna for the canning industry.

Consumption of fish is relatively low, seasonal and largely limited to Mediterranean species. Among the main reasons for this are the fragmentation and highly localized nature of the distribution chain and the still-strong preference for fresh, as opposed to frozen food products. Consumers thus tend to eat fish mainly in the summer months, when they go to the seaside for vacation, and are accustomed to pay relatively high prices, including a substantial premium for fresh over frozen product.

Certain products fall outside this general pattern, such as salted codfish, smoked salmon, smoked eel, salted anchovies, canned tuna, salmon, etc., but these also have their relatively rigid niche markets. Nevertheless, the overall consumption trend is positive, with non-traditional species/products gaining increasing acceptance, particularly as local and traditional species grow more scarce and expensive.

Italian import regulations are in process of being harmonized with those of other EU countries, but remain relatively strict and complex in comparison. For example, processed frozen products {"surgelati"} may only be imported from plants specially approved by the Italian authorities; very few additives, colouring, etc. are permitted, and must be specifically approved on a case by case basis.

Import duties, on the other hand, are the same as for other EU countries {for example, currently 2 percent on frozen pacific salmon, 13 percent on smoked salmon and salted cod, 8 percent on live lobsters, and 5.5 percent for canned salmon}.

Although the market is highly seasonal {summer months}, with a strong preference for fresh product, acceptance of frozen fish continues to grow at a faster pace than that of the sector as a whole. Up to now, the preference given to Mediterranean or warm water species and the relative ease of access to adequate supplies of traditional products from other European countries, has tended to limit interest in importing from Canada, except for certain well-introduced species/products which have unique characteristics {i.e. Pacific salmon for smoking, dried saltfish, live lobster, etc}. Consumption patterns are gradually changing as tastes come more into line with those of other European countries and fish product supplies from local and other traditional sources grow scarce.