

# The Belgian market potential for cocoa

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Belgian chocolate is famous around the world. For chocolate to be called 'Belgian Chocolate', it has to be produced in Belgium. This helps make it an important export product for Belgium. Belgium is Europe's second-largest cocoa bean importer and has a large chocolate industry. The processing market in Belgium is dominated by Barry Callebaut, Cargill and Puratos. Sustainability is key in the country.

## Contents of this page

1. [Country description](#)
2. [What makes Belgium an interesting market for cocoa?](#)
3. [Which cocoa products offer the most opportunities for the Belgian market?](#)
4. [What trends offer opportunities or pose threats on the Belgian cocoa market?](#)

Belgium is a European country with a population of 11.7 million, making it the [82<sup>nd</sup> largest country in the world](#).

Despite its small population, Belgium has [the world's 25<sup>th</sup> largest Gross Domestic Product](#) (GDP). Belgium shares borders with the Netherlands, Germany, Luxemburg and France. Foreign trade is essential for Belgium. The main export products are in the chemicals industry, vehicles and transport equipment, mineral products and machinery and electric equipment. Chocolate is also a major export product.

The [Port of Antwerp Bruges](#) is Europe's second largest seaport, after Rotterdam, and is an important connection for imported goods to the rest of Europe. It is also Europe's second largest port for the import of cocoa beans, after Amsterdam.

Figure 1: Belgium is a country in Western Europe



Source: design by Bart Wortel

This study focuses on the Belgian market for importing cocoa beans (HS codes 1801) and cocoa paste, butter and powder (HS codes 1803, 1804 and 1805).

## 2. What makes Belgium an interesting market for cocoa?

Belgium is the second-largest importer of cocoa beans in Europe after the Netherlands. 95% of these beans come directly from producing countries. Total imports grew in 2018-2022, and they are expected to continue growing in the coming years. Almost two-third of imported cocoa beans are re-exported to other European countries, making Belgium an interesting way to access other European markets too.

The chocolate market is dominated by [Barry Callebaut](#), [Cargill](#) and [Puratos](#). Belgian Chocolate is an important economic product for the local and export markets.

## Belgium is the second largest importer of cocoa beans in Europe

Cocoa beans are the most attractive product for entering the Belgian market, even after re-exported beans are considered. Belgium imported 313,000 tonnes of cocoa beans from producing countries in 2022 (Eurostat and Trade Map data). This is equal to 95% of the total volume of beans imported by Belgium that year. This is a slight decrease from the 99% share of bean imports from producing countries in 2018.

Total bean imports increased by an average of 9% per year from 2018 to 2022. The total increase of 82,000 tonnes over this period makes Belgium the fastest growing cocoa bean importer in Europe in terms of volume. Bean imports from producing countries to the Netherlands decreased during the same period. Since the Netherlands is also a major trade hub for cocoa beans, some bean imports may have shifted from the Netherlands to Belgium. The Belgian cocoa market is expected to grow in value **by 2.6% from 2023 to 2028**.

A large share of the beans imported into Belgium are shipped on, around Europe. In 2022, only 40% of total bean imports into Belgium stayed in the country for further processing. 60% of the beans (198,000 tonnes) were re-exported to other countries, mostly to Germany and France. This made Belgium the largest bean re-exporter in Europe in 2022, just ahead of the Netherlands at 191,000 tonnes. The total volume of beans re-exported from Belgium has increased at an average rate of 12% every year between 2018 and 2022.

For exporters, this means that at least 60% of the imported beans will end up in products in other countries than Belgium. However, a large volume of beans remains in Belgium for further processing. This volume increased from 100,000 tonnes in 2018 to over 131,000 tonnes in 2022, making Belgium the fourth largest net importer of cocoa beans in Europe after the Netherlands (582,000 tonnes), Germany (456,000 tonnes) and France (135,000 tonnes). This makes Belgium an interesting country in terms of both access to the Belgian market and the European market.

Source: Eurostat and Trade Map 2023

## Semi-finished product is mostly imported from other European countries

Belgium also imports large volumes of semi-finished cocoa products (paste, butter and powder). However, most of these are imported from non-cocoa producing countries. In 2022, only 3% of the imported cocoa paste came from producing countries; this was 2% for cocoa butter and less than 1% for cocoa powder. The total volume was small. In 2022, Belgium only imported 2,600 tonnes of paste, 2,100 tonnes of butter and less than 100 tonnes of powder from producing countries directly.

It could be difficult for exporters to compete on cocoa paste, butter and powder. The Belgian market for cocoa paste, butter and powder is dominated by supply from other European countries. It is more interesting for exporters and co-operatives to focus on exporting beans to Belgium.

Source: Eurostat and Trade Map 2023

## Belgium has a large chocolate industry

Belgium is world famous for its chocolate, and it has a large chocolate industry. Chocolate production and exports of Belgian Chocolate are a major part of the Belgian economy. Each year, Belgium produces **584,000 tonnes of bulk chocolate and cocoa-based products**.

In 2021, Belgium accounted for **11% of all global chocolate exports**. Cocoa and chocolate exports from Belgium were worth over **3.5 billion EUR in 2021**. The Biscuit, Chocolate, Pralines and Confectionary branch represents **11% of Belgian global turnover**. Belgian chocolate market is expected to **grow by 3.7% annually between 2023 and 2028**.

While a lot of Belgian chocolate is exported, Belgium is also a major chocolate consuming country. Belgians eat about [5.6 kg of chocolate each per year](#).

The term 'Belgian chocolate' refers to chocolate produced by the rules of the [Belgian Chocolate Code](#). According to the code, Belgian Chocolate is chocolate for which the complete process of mixing, refining and conching are carried out in Belgium. This code was developed to protect the reputation of Belgian chocolate manufacturers and their products, and to inform buyers. The claim is not legally protected by Belgian legislation but is agreed by members of the [Choprabisco Association](#). This makes chocolate produced in Belgium unique compared to other European countries.

Figure 4: An example of Belgian Chocolate



Source: Long Run Sustainability

Most Belgian chocolate is produced by a few major multinational processors. Barry Callebaut, Cargill and Puratos dominate the Belgian chocolate market. Together, they account for [over 90% of all chocolate produced in Belgium](#). Barry Callebaut's facility in Wieze is the [largest chocolate factory in the world](#). Cargill has large chocolate [production facilities in Mouscron](#). [Puratos has several factories](#) in Belgium.

There are also other multinational chocolate manufacturers that have factories in Belgium. [Mondelēz](#) has production facilities in Heretals and Namen. [Ferrero](#) also has production facilities in Arlon. However, a large amount of this chocolate is exported to other markets outside Belgium. Working with these companies specifically will not help exporters gain access to the Belgian market but to larger European markets (potentially including Belgium).

## Tips:

Use your web browser's translation function to read website links in this study in your own language.

If you want to enter the Belgian market, the best way is to work with Barry Callebaut, Cargill or Puratos. These companies produce over 90% of the chocolate for the Belgian market, and a large share of exported 'Belgian Chocolate'. Read more about these companies in our study on [Entering the Belgian market for cocoa](#).

Belgium is also a good way for mainstream brands to enter the European market. Mondelēz and Ferrero have chocolate factories in Belgium. If your cocoa beans are suitable for the mainstream market, then these companies are interesting to work with.

A large share of the Belgian cocoa beans are re-exported. These beans are mainly shipped to Germany and France. Read our country studies on [Germany](#) and [France](#) for more information about these markets. See our study on [The demand for cocoa on the European market](#) for more detailed information about the European trade in cocoa beans.

See the website of the [Belgian Confectionery Industry Organisation](#) for more information about the chocolate industry in Belgium. Access the [European Commission's Trade Department](#) website to learn more about the EU's trade policy and trade relations with the rest of the world. The [Access2Markets](#) page has useful information to help exporters from producing countries that import into the EU. By searching for cocoa in the search bar at the top, you will be able to find the latest news and developments for cocoa imports.

### 3. Which cocoa products offer the most opportunities for the Belgian market?

Belgian Chocolate has an international reputation for quality. Bulk beans are the largest import product. The market for specialty cocoa is small but growing. The demand for certified and 'sustainable' cocoa is increasing, and sustainable cocoa makes up a large share of the Belgian market.

#### Belgium is an interesting market for bulk beans

Bulk bean imports are the most interesting market in Belgium. Bulk cocoa is of standard quality and traded in high volumes. It follows international prices set in the London and New York futures markets. A large part of these volumes are mainstream, bulk cocoa beans and a large share of the 'Belgian chocolate' is made with these beans, rather than specialty cocoa. The value of Belgian Chocolate is mostly added in the refined chocolate making process.

The main import country for Belgium is Côte d'Ivoire, which supplies 54% of the beans, followed by Ghana (19%), Nigeria (6%), Ecuador (6%), the Dominican Republic (4%) and Cameroon (3%). Barry Callebaut, Cargill and Puratos do not report volumes per origin country and target market, but the key origin countries are likely to be similar to this list. You can read more about Belgium imports per country and the link to these three companies in our study on [Entering the Belgian market for cocoa](#).

#### There is also a large demand for certified cocoa

Belgium is an interesting market for Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance and Organic certified cocoa. In 2021, [65% of the chocolate produced in Belgium](#) was covered by a certification scheme or corporate sustainability scheme. This percentage has increased every year since 2018, as you can see in the table below. This includes independent third-party certification schemes such as Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance and Organic, but it also includes company-led sustainability schemes.

Source: [Beyond Chocolate 2021 Annual Report](#)

Fairtrade has grown a lot in Belgium over the last few years. The retail market share for Fairtrade cocoa has [increased from 4.6% in 2018 to 20% in 2022](#). The total market value was 312 million EUR in 2022. [Two-thirds of the key Fairtrade products](#) (including chocolate) are also organic certified. Examples of Fairtrade brands include [Guylian](#), [Belfine](#) and [Oxfam](#).

The Rainforest Alliance is also an interesting market for Belgium. According to the Rainforest Alliance's cocoa data, Belgium only imported [200 tonnes in 2022](#). However, the small volume could be a result of how data is collected and attributed (for example if company headquarters are in another country). The cocoa volumes that end up on the market are probably much larger than that. There were 99 companies registered in 2022, which is 6% of all companies registered with Rainforest Alliance globally. This is probably a better indicator of market size. Examples of Rainforest Alliance brands include [Leonidas](#) and [Neuhaus](#).

Note that Rainforest Alliance and UTZ merged in 2018. However, UTZ certified cocoa was still available for several years after that, during the roll-out of the [2020 Rainforest Alliance certification program](#) and because of the [challenge of transitioning certificate holders to the new standard](#). By 2022, all cocoa certificate holders have transitioned from UTZ to Rainforest Alliance, so UTZ cocoa will no longer be available. The data above refers to Rainforest Alliance cocoa.

Read more about how to join certification schemes in our study on [Exporting certified cocoa to Europe](#).

#### High quality cocoa is interesting for boutique and artisan chocolate

There is a small segment of boutique, artisan bean-to-bar chocolate products. Although this segment is small,

Belgium boutique chocolate has an international reputation for quality. The market is growing. Choprabisco sees [more small-scale artisanal chocolate makers joining their federation every year](#).

Many companies in this segment already have established supply chains. This makes it difficult for producers or exporters to become part of these supply chains. Some small brands may be looking to expand, which could be an opportunity for producers and exporters. There may also be some new companies that are looking to set up a direct supply chain, which could be another opportunity.

Many small, boutique brands will also buy from the main three chocolate suppliers in Belgium. [Puratos](#) is especially active in this segment. Their customers are in the (end) market segments Industry, Food Service, Retail and Artisans. To specify their business, Puratos has [worked together with thousands of artisans](#). They have a large network of innovation centres globally and a large team of technical advisors.

Belgian premium chocolate makers such as [David Maenhout](#) play a role in the development of craft chocolate in Belgium. Although the volumes are very small, it could be an interesting market for exporters with high quality, specialty cocoa.

### Tips:

The most effective way to access the Belgian market is to connect with the supply chain of Barry Callebaut, Cargill or Puratos. In case they are not the first buyer of your cocoa, you could also sell to exporters that sell to these companies. Speak with your potential buyers about the supply chains that they can sell through.

There is a large and increasing demand for certified cocoa in Belgium. Use the [Rainforest Alliance certificate database](#) to search for certified companies in Belgium as potential buyers. Use the filters on the left to filter on Belgium and cocoa. Check the [Fairtrade Business Catalogue](#) for Fairtrade and organic certified chocolate companies in Belgium. You may have an advantage as an exporter if you are ready to export certified cocoa.

Research small specialty cocoa brands in Belgium. Read our study on [Entering the Belgian market for cocoa](#) for more details.

## 4. What trends offer opportunities or pose threats on the Belgian cocoa market?

### Sustainability is on the rise

The market for cocoa that is either certified or that is part of a company sustainability scheme is on the increase. This is partly influenced by the Belgian cocoa initiative [Beyond Chocolate](#), which is the partnership for a sustainable Belgian chocolate industry. Partners in the initiative are working to make long-lasting improvements to the living conditions of cocoa farmers and their families in the cocoa growing regions that are relevant to the Belgian industry.

Beyond Chocolate is a voluntary partnership, but its members have committed to several things that are interesting for producers and exporters. This includes a commitment that all [the chocolate produced and/or sold in Belgium will comply with a certification standard or company sustainability scheme by 2025](#). The companies that are part of Beyond Chocolate will need to buy chocolate that is part of a certification standard or corporate sustainability scheme. 76% of the chocolate produced in 2021 by Beyond Chocolate members was part of a corporate programme or certification, meaning 24% were not part of a scheme at that point.

Not all chocolate in Belgium is covered by this commitment. Beyond Chocolate members only represent 57% of the Belgian chocolate market, so the certified share only covers 43% of the total market (76% of 57%), and 14% is not certified (24% of 57%). It is unknown how much of the remaining 43% is part of a certification or company programme. The overall share for chocolate produced in Belgium could be different.

Source: [Beyond Chocolate](#) 2021 Annual Report

The share of cocoa that is part of a corporate sustainability scheme is also growing. This includes company programmes from brands like Mondelez [Cocoa Life](#) and [Nestlé Cocoa Plan](#), but also includes traders and processors like Barry Callebaut's [Cocoa Horizons](#), [Puratos Cacao-Trace](#) and [Cargill Cocoa Promise](#). Our study on [Entering the European market for Multi-certified coffee](#) explains the difference between company-led sustainability schemes and certification schemes in a lot of detail. The study is on coffee, but the situation is similar for cocoa.

For exporters, this could mean extra opportunities to sell cocoa if it is certified or part of a company sustainability scheme. The decision to join a corporate sustainability scheme is market driven. This means that cocoa producers should only join a corporate sustainability scheme (i.e. a company programme) if they have confirmed demand with the buyer of that programme.

## Consumers are becoming more interested in the story behind the chocolate

Storytelling is a way to communicate clearly about your product and get the attention of your audience. Storytelling makes the buyers of the products feel more connected to the company behind the product. These stories should be accurate, authentic and appealing. They can be used to link the consumers with the producers of the cocoa that is in the final product. There should therefore be a direct link between the final product and the producers.

More brands are becoming interested in telling the story behind the cocoa in their products. This is especially the case for boutique or specialty chocolate.

However, as a producer or an exporter it is not easy to link your story to a brand. It can be difficult to develop a direct relationship with Belgian chocolate brands. Most brands will buy their cocoa or chocolate through Barry Callebaut, Cargill or Puratos. One way to work directly with brands is to offer a unique sustainability story. The cocoa could still be shipped by one of the main traders or processors, but this could give an exporter or producer the chance to build a direct relationship with long-term benefits.

An example of a chocolate company with a link to cocoa production is [Galler](#). Galler has an agroforestry project in Côte d'Ivoire, where they [work together with Yeyasso](#), the co-operative operating on the land where the project will take place. The project includes planting more than 50,000 trees. Galler works with the Directorate General for Development Cooperation and Beyond Chocolate and several technical partners. See also their [Corporate Responsibility Report](#) for more details.

Another example is Belfine, which [supports 148 cocoa farmers](#) in the village Tigorikro in Côte d'Ivoire. This is done through their sustainability programme Route de Cacao.

Neuhaus is an example of a company that has a fully traceable supply chain from cocoa farmer to their factory. Neuhaus has [invested in a cocoa farm in the Guayaquil Region of Ecuador](#). The cocoa is Rainforest Alliance certified and is fully traceable through the Identity Preserved model. This means that the cocoa from this source is kept separate from all other cocoa throughout the supply chain, until the final product.

An example of a retailer is Colruyt, which [buys cocoa directly from the farmers through two international chain projects](#). In Côte d'Ivoire, Colruyt group pays a living income reference price. Most of this additional price goes directly to the farmer. In Nicaragua, Colruyt supports a project where they buy cocoa directly from 200 young

farmers in the La Campesina cooperative. They work with several partners on this project. They help provide training and guidance to make quality, sustainable products. For local youth, this project is also an extra motivation to continue cocoa farming.

An example of a brand from a producing country that has successfully tapped into these trends is [Paccari](#) from Ecuador. Paccari is a value-driven brand with a strong focus on sustainability. They work directly with small-scale farmers and pay them a fair price. Paccari [tells their story in a captivating way, illustrated with pictures](#). The chocolate is produced from tree to bar and shipped to many countries around the world.

## Belgian consumers demand healthier chocolates

Belgium [consumed 5.6 kg of chocolate per capita in 2022](#). Compared to other European countries, this is relatively high. However, countries such as Switzerland (8.8 kg), Austria (8.1 kg) and Germany (7.9 kg) have a higher per capita consumption.

Although Belgian consumers are increasingly looking for healthier food products, there is still a lot of [demand for sweet snacks as well](#). This opens opportunities for sugar-free or low sugar products. Both chocolate manufacturers and makers are responding to this trend by using more natural sweeteners (such as stevia and agave). The chocolate brand [Sweet Switch](#) is an example of a sugar-free Belgian chocolate brand. An example of a raw chocolate brand without refined sugars, dairy products or additives is the brand [Takana](#).

Companies are also starting to use cocoa products such as cocoa juice as a natural sweetener. An example is Koa, which is a drink made from natural cocoa fruit juice. The Nestlé brand [Incoa](#) and [Lindt Excellence Cocoa Pure](#) are made exclusively with the cocoa fruit. Cocoa juice and chocolate is supplied by processors such as Barry Callebaut and Valrhona.

The consumption of dark chocolate in Belgium is increasing, as chocolate with a higher cocoa content is perceived as healthier. [Large Belgian supermarkets like Delhaize sell many different dark chocolate bars](#). Offering smaller sizes of chocolate products has also become more common. For example, [Mars sells bite-size Twix bars and Nestlé reduced the sugar in the KitKat](#) (use the filter on the top-left corner to filter on brand). Chocolate companies also add more ingredients that are perceived to be healthy, like fruits and nuts. An example is the [Côte d'Or Fruit product line](#), produced by Mondelez.

### Tips:

Check the list of companies that are members of [Beyond Chocolate](#). Every member is committed to buying 100% of their cocoa as part of a certification programme or company sustainability scheme. Some of these companies still need to increase their volumes before 2025. An estimated 57% of the consumer market is now covered by Beyond Chocolate members.

Keep in mind that over 90% of the chocolate produced in Belgium is produced by Barry Callebaut, Cargill or Puratos. This means that the most relevant schemes are probably Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance for certification, and Cocoa Horizons, Cocoa Promise or Cacao Trace for company schemes.

Beyond Chocolate also co-finances projects. Check the website for opportunities. There was a [call for proposals in 2023](#).

Check the website of [Enabel](#), the Belgian development agency. Enabel publishes useful information about cocoa production and imports on the Belgian market.

For more information about how to tell your (sustainability story), read our study on [Nine tips to become more socially responsible in the cocoa sector](#).

[Molgo Research](#) carried out this study in partnership with [Long Run Sustainability](#) and [Amonarmah Consults](#) on behalf of CBI.

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