

The European market potential for octopus

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Depending on the end market different products are requested. For octopus, wholesale and retail are the main end markets. The wholesale segment does offer various products but these are seldomly value added products, while retail offers a wider range of products including value added and re-processed items. Italy is leading when it comes to consumption of octopus and while Spain is the number one importer, it re-exports a large part as well. Storytelling is a rising trend and can lead to a premium price level, and fortunately octopus has some unique features which you can use to make optimal use of this trend.

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1. Product description

Octopus is the collective name for several species with the scientific name Octopodidae and Eledonidae. Common octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*) is the most important species. In most European countries, octopus is the common name. Southern Europeans have a range of names for it, such as Poulpe (France), Pulpo (Italy) and Pulpos (Spain). Other main species are the Mexican octopus (*Octopus maya*), Horned octopus (*Eledone cirrosa*) and Musky octopus (*Eledone mochata*). Morocco, Mauritania, Mexico, Senegal and Portugal are the main producers of common octopus. For Mexican octopus the main producer is Mexico and for Horned and Musky octopus it is Italy.

Various different octopus products are sold in Europe, depending on the market segment. Whole raw frozen, thawed or fresh octopus (but also whole cooked or boiled octopus) are usually sold block frozen or individually quick frozen (IQF) in either a flower or ball form in wholesale packages. They can be delivered in polybags of different weights, from 1 to 15 kilograms.

In retail, packaging depends on the product type. Raw frozen, thawed or fresh products are mostly packed in polystyrene/plastic trays or plastic bags of up to 1 kg. Cooked or boiled octopus is often sold in vacuum bags. Various types of processed, value-added products like marinated octopus, octopus in oil or octopus with garlic come in smaller carton boxes up to 500 grams.

Picture 1 and 2: Retail packaging of 1) marinated octopus (200 gram) and 2) cooked whole octopus (600-800 gram) in Spain



Source: Eroski.es

Harmonised System codes for octopus

To understand the trade of octopus we look at the Harmonised System (HS) codes. The HS is an international nomenclature for the classification of products. It allows participating countries to classify traded goods on a common basis for customs purposes. When “octopus” is referred to in this factsheet, this concerns the following [Harmonised System](#) codes:

- 030751 – Octopus “*Octopus spp.*”, live, fresh or chilled
- 030752 – Octopus “*Octopus spp.*”, frozen
- 030759 – Octopus “*Octopus spp.*”, smoked, dried, salted or in brine
- 160555 – Octopus “*Octopus spp.*”, prepared or preserved (excl. smoked)

2. What makes Europe an interesting market for octopus?

Southern European countries produce and consume octopus in large quantities. However, the volume they catch is not enough to meet the market demand, therefore a lot of octopus is imported from developing countries. By understanding how the market and the supply chain work, you can get your product to the right buyers.

Europe has a stable demand for octopus

In the European Market Observatory for Fisheries and Aquaculture Products (EUMOFA) report about the European Union fish market, it is established that Europeans have a huge appetite for seafood. In Europe, total seafood consumption reached 12.69 million tonnes in 2017. This comes down to a seafood consumption of 24.3 kg per capita, making it above the world’s average. The market for octopus in Europe seems to be stable, but accounts for only a small part of total Fish and Seafood consumption (about 1 to 2%).

This stability on the consumption of octopus can offer you an opportunity as an exporter, European importers are keen to build long lasting business relationships. A stable demand helps as it might provide an incentive to work with longer term contracts, or develop a specific brand name or invest in storytelling.

Tips:

- To understand the position of Octopus in the European seafood market read the CBI Fish and Seafood Market Statistics and Outlook Study to [learn more about the consumption, demand and imports of the European market](#).
- To understand the long lasting relationships Europe and importer foster, read the study [Tips to do business](#).
- For data about the EU seafood market and the consumption it is also possible to make use of the free accessible database [EUMOFA](#).

Europe is familiar with octopus due to own fleet catches

European countries in coastal member states have their own fishing fleets targeting seafood products for domestic consumption and export.

Octopus are targeted mainly around the Mediterranean region. Five European countries provide over 95% of the European Union production: Italy (9,161 tonnes in 2018), Spain (6,799 tonnes), Portugal (6,236 tonnes), Greece (3,190 tonnes) and France (2,314 tonnes). The five biggest countries providing the European Union production are hereby familiar with octopus and it is a part of their regular diet.

Total European Union production fluctuated between 28,000 tonnes (2017) and 32,000 tonnes (2016) in the last five years. Common octopus is the most important species.

Tip:

Learn more about the European fishing fleet by reading the [2019 Annual Economic Report of the EU Fishing Fleet](#). In this report you can find more information about country specific and regional specific fisheries.

Europe is depending on octopus imports to fulfil demand

On its own, domestic octopus supply cannot fulfil the European consumer demand. About 80% of the total European octopus consumption is coming from abroad.

European import volumes of octopus decreased by 6.7%, from 199,000 tonnes in 2018 to 185,000 tonnes in 2019. Compared to the 2014-2019 average of 191,000 tonnes, import volume decreased by 2.6%. Over 90% of the European octopus imports were of the frozen variety (168,000 tonnes in 2019). The volumes of imported live, fresh or chilled, smoked, cooked, dried or salted, and further prepared octopus are rather small. This is because most of the processing and value addition for end markets is done by European companies in European facilities, using frozen octopus as input.

The largest importers of frozen octopus are Spain and Italy. With an import volume of 69,000 tonnes, Spain had a 41% share of European Union imports in 2019. The import share for Italy was 34%, corresponding with 56,000 tonnes of octopus imports. Portugal completes the top three of European importers with an import volume of 20,000 tonnes in 2019. Other significant importers of octopus in Europe are Greece (7,000 tonnes), France (4,000 tonnes) and Germany (3,000 tonnes).

Almost 70% of the total octopus import volume comes from third countries (129,000 tonnes in 2019). Morocco (47,000 tonnes in 2019) is the leading third country supplier, followed by Mauritania (28,000 tonnes), Senegal (12,000 tonnes), Indonesia (10,000 tonnes) and Mexico (6,000 tonnes). These five countries together represent 79% of total European third country imports.

In 2019, 30% of the octopus import volume came from European countries (57,000 tonnes). Most of the imported octopus came from the main European producers, Spain and Portugal. European countries imported 38,000 tonnes of octopus from Spain and 7,000 tonnes from Portugal in 2019, corresponding with 79% of the total import volume from European countries.

Europe also (re-)exports octopus

The total European export of octopus amounted to 74,000 tonnes in 2019. Export volumes decreased by 4.5%, from 77,000 tonnes in 2018 to 74,000 tonnes in 2019. Compared to the 2014-2019 average, the export volume decreased by 1.8%. 79% of the export volume were from frozen variety.

Most of the octopus export volume (77%) is exported to the most important octopus consuming countries in Europe. The top three European destinations for octopus exports were Italy (19,000 tonnes in 2019), Portugal (12,000 tonnes) and Spain (8,000 tonnes). These three countries represented 68% of the total export to other European countries. Germany (4,000 tonnes), France (4,000 tonnes) and Greece (3,000 tonnes) complete the top six exporters. European exports mainly consists of re-exports of frozen products originally imported from outside Europe to other European countries.

3. Which European countries offer most opportunities for octopus?

The octopus market in Europe is mainly focused around the Mediterranean area. Most octopus consumed in Europe is supplied by Spain, Morocco and Mauritania. Spain is also in the top three of markets that offer opportunities for exporters from developing countries, together with Italy and Portugal. These three countries are responsible for over 80% of total European octopus consumption. In general, the consumption of octopus in Europe is relatively stable. The total apparent consumption of octopus amounted to 150,000 tonnes in 2018, an increase of 2.8% compared to the 2014-2018 average.

Spain is European leader of octopus (re-)export

Spain is a traditional octopus consuming country located in the south of Europe. The total octopus supply for Spain in 2018 was 82,091 tonnes, the highest of all European countries. This amount was based on its own fleet catches (6,799 tonnes) and imports (75,292 tonnes). However, 48,807 tonnes of the available octopus are (re-)exported by Spain, corresponding with around 60% of the total supply. Italy (32%), Portugal (22%) and the United States (20%) are the most important export markets.

With an apparent consumption of 33,284 tonnes, Spain is the second most important consumer of octopus in Europe (table 1). The optimal size of octopus in the Spanish market is 1 to 2 kilograms. Most of the products are imported into Spain frozen (95%) and sold thawed into retail or wholesale. Products from Morocco and Mauritania are considered the best in terms of quality and meat yield. These countries are responsible for over 65% of the total octopus import by Spain.

Table 1: Apparent consumption of octopus in Spain, year 2018 (volume in tonnes live weight equivalent)

	Catches	Import	Supply	Export	Apparent consumption
Spain	6,799	75,292	82,091	48,807	33,284

Source: FAO and Eurostat, modified by Seafood Trade Intelligence Portal

In Spain octopus are traditionally consumed as a main dish, often served as grilled chunks in olive oil. For Spain it is also expected that the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the octopus demand in the short term. On long-term it is expected that the same recovery will take place as in the other European countries.

Italy is Europe's number one octopus consumer

Italy is one of the European countries around the Mediterranean where consumers are familiar with octopus. The Italian fishing fleet landed 9,161 tonnes of octopus in 2018. Beside Italy's own catch, 69,867 tonnes of live-weight octopus was imported from countries inside and outside Europe. In 2018 56% of the total import volume came from Spain (25%), Morocco (18%) and Indonesia (13%). Other relevant countries were Mexico (11%), Senegal (7%), Vietnam (4%), India (4%) and Mauritania (3%).

The total Italian supply – which includes both import and fresh catch – of octopus in 2018 (79,028 tonnes) minus the export (4,699) gives an indication of the octopus consumption in Italy. This so-called apparent consumption amounted to 74,329 tonnes in 2018 (table 2).

Table 2: Apparent consumption of octopus in Italy, year 2018 (volume in tonnes live weight equivalent)

	Catches	Import	Supply	Export	Apparent consumption
Italy	9,161	69,867	79,028	4,699	74,329

Source: FAO and Eurostat, modified by Seafood Trade Intelligence Portal

Over 90% of the octopus products imported into Italy are frozen products. Other products imported are live / fresh / chilled octopus (5% of imported value and volume), smoked / dried / salted octopus or octopus in brine (3% of imported value and volume) or prepared / preserved octopus (2% of imported value and volume).

Most of the imported octopus are sold (thawed) by Italian wholesalers and retailers. Octopus are traditionally consumed in Italy as a main dish or in salads, with a consumption peak during Christmas.

As for all countries within Europe, it is expected that the COVID-19 pandemic will have an impact on octopus demand in the short term. Southern European countries were hit particularly hard by this virus, which has had a negative impact on the economy of these countries. In the long-term, however, it is expected that demand will grow again due to an increasing population and economic recovery.

Portugal third in Europe, consuming over 15,000 tonnes of octopus

Portugal can be seen as the third important country for octopus consumption (table 3). With domestic catches reaching 6,236 tonnes and an import volume of 26,416 tonnes total, the Portuguese octopus supply reached 32,652 tonnes in 2018. Almost half of this supply were used for (re-)export, mainly to Spain (10,439 tonnes), United States (1,840 tonnes) and Italy (1,567 tonnes).

Table 3: Apparent consumption of octopus in Portugal, year 2018 (volume in tonnes live weight equivalent)

	Catches	Import	Supply	Export	Apparent consumption
Portugal	6,236	26,416	32,652	15,992	16,660

Source: FAO and Eurostat, modified by Seafood Trade Intelligence Portal

With an apparent consumption of 16,660 tonnes Portugal is the last European country consuming over 15,000 tonnes of octopus. Mainly thawed octopus is used in traditional Portuguese dishes like boiled and baked octopus with smashed potatoes and herbed garlic oil.

Octopus fits in the culture of Greece

Octopus is present on the whole of the Mediterranean coast of Greece. Imports are becoming a less important part of total supply in this country, but still cover over two thirds of the octopus volume (6,671 tonnes). Most of the octopus imported into Greece came from Indonesia (2,218 tonnes), Spain (1,222 tonnes) and Italy (539 tonnes). The total Greek octopus supply reached 9,861 tonnes in 2018 (table 4).

Table 4: Apparent consumption of octopus in Greece, year 2018 (volume in tonnes live weight equivalent)

	Catches	Import	Supply	Export	Apparent consumption
Greece	3,190	6,671	9,861	1,273	8,588

Source: FAO and Eurostat, modified by Seafood Trade Intelligence Portal

Around 30% of the available octopus is sold fresh, mainly coming from the country's own fleet catches. The imported octopus products (of which 92% was frozen) are sold frozen or thawed for traditional Greek cuisine. Some of the most popular dishes include grilled fresh octopus, octopus with pasta, as well as roasted or marinated octopus.

France loves prepared and preserved octopus products

The French fishing fleet does not operate in the Mediterranean region. As such, all octopus catches come from the North-East Atlantic region. In total, 2,314 tonnes of octopus was caught by the French fleet in 2018, corresponding with 29% of total French octopus supply (table 5). Over 70% of the available octopus in France is imported. The import of frozen octopus was most important (69% of total import volume) but, compared to other Southern European countries, less dominant.

The import share of prepared and preserved octopus was 17%, which is high. These prepared and preserved octopus products were imported mainly via Italy and Spain.

Table 5: Apparent consumption of octopus in France, year 2018 (volume in tonnes live weight equivalent)

	Catches	Import	Supply	Export	Apparent consumption
France	2,314	5,725	8,039	1,227	6,812

Source: FAO and Eurostat, modified by Seafood Trade Intelligence Portal

Germany is a market with potential

Germany does not have its own fleet targeting octopus. All supply comes from imports (table 6). Octopus are mainly imported frozen (64% of total imports), but also prepared and preserved (19% of total imports) and fresh (16% of total imports).

Table 6: Apparent consumption of octopus in Germany, year 2018 (volume in tonnes live weight equivalent)

	Catches	Import	Supply	Export	Apparent consumption
Germany	0	1,771	1,771	486	1,285

Source: FAO and Eurostat, modified by Seafood Trade Intelligence Portal

Consumption is much lower in the north of Europe than in it is the south. The apparent consumption in Germany amounted to 1,285 tonnes. Octopus is more often sold in certain market niches, such as restaurants with an Asian or Mediterranean cuisine. However, as younger people are increasingly open to these types of restaurants, you may have small but growing opportunities to sell bigger amounts of octopus to countries in Northern and Western Europe.

Tips:

- If you want to export octopus to Europe, the best opportunities are offered by importers in Spain, Italy and Portugal, as these companies also sell octopus to other countries in Europe.
- Read the CBI Market Analysis to [learn more about the regional differences in Fish and Seafood consumption](#) between European countries. It will help you to understand what markets to target and how.
- Find more information about the European Union seafood consumption in the [EU Fish Market 2019 report](#) published by EUMOFA.

4. Which trends offer opportunities on the European octopus market?

It is important to understand the different trends that are affecting the various markets, because they provide information on what these markets want, including insights into what buyers find important. Some of these trends may eventually become mandatory buyer requirements, so it would be smart to monitor the development of these trends closely. In this study, we look at two trends that have significant influence on market access, now and increasingly in the future: sustainability and storytelling.

Ecolabels are getting more important in Northern Europe

Ecolabels like the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) for wild caught seafood and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) for aquaculture seafood are dominant in North Western Europe and are growing elsewhere. These labels prove that seafood products come from sustainable sources. There are concerns about the level of sustainability of octopus fisheries worldwide. Fishermen need to put in more effort to catch enough octopus for the growing world demand. As a result, some octopus stocks are possibly overexploited. In the northern part of Europe, there is a huge market for sustainable certified seafood.

At the moment (in September 2020), two octopus fisheries in the world have been certified by the MSC. One octopus fishery using artisanal traps in the North-East Atlantic and one octopus fishery using artisanal traps in the East Indian Ocean. If you are able to become one of the first exporters of certified octopus, this can give you opportunities to sell to new clients or obtain access to other market segments.

Worldwide Fisheries Improvement Projects (FIP) are actively working towards creating sustainable fisheries. For octopus, the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership (SFP) is working on an [octopus project](#), organising different

Supply Chain Roundtables with octopus suppliers to improve octopus fisheries sustainability.

Especially in Northern Europe more markets will become ecolabel driven. There is a growing number of restaurants that only sell seafood products with an ecolabel. It is expected that the number of restaurants selling only sustainable seafood will grow in the coming years. For Southern Europe, where ecolabels are less important, it is not expected that having an ecolabel will be a must in the next few years.

Tips:

- Visit the [MSC website](#) to learn more about MSC certification and related [MSC octopus fisheries](#). On the MSC website you can assess whether MSC certification would be interesting for your octopus product.
- Try to participate in the abovementioned SFP project by [contacting](#) the organisation, and work towards being a sustainable octopus fishery.

Branding and storytelling can help to convince customers

European consumers want to know more about the products they consume. They take interest in the origin and sustainability of the products they buy. Since octopus is still a niche product in the Northern European market, storytelling can help to build a premium product and receive a premium price. In short, storytelling helps you connect your consumers to your product by telling them more about your product. This story can be about the production practices used, the type of producers that are involved or even the health benefits of your products.

Octopus has at least three unique selling points that help to build a story:

- 1) it is, most of the time, caught using hundreds of bright lights at night to attract plankton, the cephalopod's favourite meal. The octopus will follow the plankton to the surface and are then caught by fishermen, ensuring no bycatch;
- 2) octopus reproduce rapidly, so overfishing is often less of a problem that it is for other fisheries; and
- 3) octopus also offers a featured ingredient, namely the ink from the octopus itself. This ink can be used in dishes like risotto nero and arroz negro.

To set your product apart, you need to show your customers and the end consumers that it is worth paying a good price for the special octopus you offer. Combining a strong verifiable story with a recognised sustainability certification will give you a strong competitive advantage in the European market.

You can realise better margins if you market your octopus as more sustainable or of higher quality than the octopus of your competitor. Think about the unique selling points of your products and production, and how you can better promote them.


Tips:

- Find inspiration for your story at European seafood companies like [Queens](#) and [John West](#) and create your own.
- Companies outside the seafood sector could also be a good inspiration source for your story. Study some companies from other commodities like [eggs](#), [coffee](#) or [cheese](#) to find ideas to optimise your story.
- Read the CBI Trends study to [learn how the importance of storytelling, and other market trends, can help you to get your product on the European market](#).


The study has been carried out on behalf of CBI by [Seafood Trade Intelligence Portal](#)

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