EU TRADE EXPLORER

Market evolution: Cheese and curd (CN 0406) — 2015–2025

Introduction

The European Union is a major global player in cheese and curd. This report examines the evolution of EU trade in CN 0406 (Cheese and curd) with non-EU partners from 2015 to 2025. Using year-level data, the analysis highlights three main dynamics: a strong increase in export value driving a widening trade surplus, a reorientation toward new export destinations and more diversified import sources, and a structural shift toward higher-value products and greater self-reliance.

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1. A decade of booming export values and a widening trade surplus

Export value nearly doubles, fuelled by price rises and modest volume growth

EU exports of cheese and curd rose from €5.02 billion in 2015 to €9.07 billion in 2025, an increase of 80.8 % (Trade overview). This performance was driven by both higher export unit prices and a moderate expansion of volumes. The average export price increased from €4,327 per tonne to €6,381 per tonne (+47.5 %), while the quantity exported grew from 1.16 million tonnes to 1.42 million tonnes (+22.6 %). Price gains thus accounted for a larger share of the value surge, signalling strong global demand for EU cheese and a willingness to pay a premium for it.

Indicator	2015	2025	Change (%)
Export value (€)	5,015,061,134	9,066,070,220	+80.8
Export quantity (t)	1,159,091	1,420,746	+22.6
Export unit price (€/t)	4,327	6,381	+47.5

Imports rise moderately, leaving a record trade balance

On the import side, the EU's purchases from non-EU countries increased from €867 million to €1,257 million (+45.0 %), a much slower pace than exports. Import quantities barely moved (from 187,431 tonnes to 199,560 tonnes, +6.5 %), while import prices climbed from €4,627 per tonne to €6,300 per tonne (+36.2 %). As a result, the EU's trade surplus in cheese and curd widened from €4.15 billion to €7.81 billion (+88.3 %). The surplus has grown almost every year, reinforcing the EU's position as a net exporter with a remarkably strong external balance.

Indicator	2015	2025	Change (%)
Import value (€)	867,199,446	1,257,143,715	+45.0
Import quantity (t)	187,431	199,560	+6.5
Import unit price (€/t)	4,627	6,300	+36.2
Trade balance (€)	4,147,861,688	7,808,926,505	+88.3

2. Evolving trade partnerships: diversification and new growth engines

Traditional export markets remain the bedrock, but Japan shows signs of saturation

The United Kingdom stayed the EU's largest export market throughout the period, with exports growing from €1.68 billion to €2.62 billion (+55.6 %) (Top trade partners). The United States followed closely, rising from €835 million to €1,326 million (+58.8 %). Switzerland, the fourth-largest destination, saw exports jump from €307 million to €566 million (+84.4 %). Japan, however, reached a peak of €588 million in 2022 before falling back to €449 million in 2025, highlighting a possible market maturity.

Ukraine, South Korea and Saudi Arabia emerge as dynamic new destinations

Some of the most striking growth rates appeared in smaller but fast-expanding markets. Exports to Ukraine soared from €19.0 million to €239.5 million (+1,159.5 %), reflecting the EU's deep-ened economic ties and support for the country. South Korea more than doubled, from €125.9 million to €265.0 million (+110.6 %), while Saudi Arabia rose from €140.8 million to €238.3 million (+69.3 %).

Import sources stay highly concentrated, but new suppliers bring volatility

Imports remain heavily concentrated in two neighbouring countries: the United Kingdom (€453 million to €594 million, +31.1 %) and Switzerland (€389 million to €556 million, +42.8 %). Meanwhile, several previously negligible suppliers saw explosive percentage in-creases: imports from Ukraine grew from practically zero to €11.2 million, Türkiye from €1,141 to €10.2 million, and New Zealand from €9.4 million to €25.9 million. These new flows, though still modest in total value, are extremely volatile – the coefficients of variation for quantity imports from Ukraine (1.41) and New Zealand (1.37) are far higher than for the UK (0.12) or Switzerland (0.08) (Volatility & shocks).

Export partner	2015 (€)	2025 (€)	Change (%)
United Kingdom	1,683,937,830	2,619,737,752	+55.6
United States	834,992,560	1,326,057,039	+58.8
Japan	264,767,020	448,530,710	+69.4
Switzerland	307,006,899	566,020,790	+84.4
Korea, Republic of	125,850,958	265,005,765	+110.6
Saudi Arabia	140,765,788	238,285,443	+69.3
Ukraine	19,012,578	239,461,640	+1,159.5

Import partner	2015 (€)	2025 (€)	Change (%)
United Kingdom	452,927,526	593,798,226	+31.1
Switzerland	389,267,255	555,701,526	+42.8
New Zealand	9,415,908	25,948,721	+175.6
Norway	7,431,444	18,843,542	+153.6
Serbia	1,373,023	9,012,713	+556.4
Ukraine	2,621	11,151,579	growth from near zero
Türkiye	1,141	10,220,941	growth from near zero

3. Premiumisation and structural resilience of EU cheese production

The product mix shifts decisively toward higher-value and fresh categories

EU exports are moving upmarket. The “other cheese” category (CN 040690), comprising mainly mature and semi-mature cheeses, remains the largest export segment, rising from €3.16 billion to €5.39 billion. However, the fastest growth occurred in fresh cheese (040610), which more than doubled from €940 million to €2,220 billion, and grated or powdered cheese (040620), which nearly tripled from €178 million to €515 million (Product segment breakdown). Unit prices increased across all sub-headings, with grated/powdered cheese prices rising from €5,477/t to €8,211/t and “other cheese” from €4,810/t to €7,360/t.

Export segment	2015 (€)	2025 (€)	Change (%)
040690 – Other cheese	3,162,691,827	5,392,254,217	+70.5
040610 – Fresh cheese	939,879,813	2,219,963,598	+136.2
040630 – Processed cheese	573,439,957	737,903,227	+28.7
040620 – Grated/powdered cheese	177,851,975	515,271,862	+189.5
040640 – Blue-veined cheese	161,197,561	200,677,318	+24.5

Domestic production value leaps ahead of volume, reflecting quality upgrades

The EU's own cheese production has followed a similar quality-driven trajectory. Production quantity grew from 7.68 billion kg (2015, rounded) to an estimated 11.67 billion kg in 2024 (+36.7 %), while the value of that production surged from €34.5 billion to €62.6 billion in 2024 (+114.1 %) (Production volumes). The implicit unit value of EU cheese production thus roughly doubled over the decade, confirming a broad-based shift toward higher-quality and more expensive varieties.

Declining export concentration and increased self-reliance reinforce external strength

The export market has become more diversified: the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) for EU cheese exports fell from 1,530 in 2015 to 1,197 in 2025 (−21.8 %), meaning reliance on a few large buyers has diminished (Market concentration). At the same time, the EU's net import reliance became more negative (from −8.6 % in 2015 to −13.2 % in 2024), and the share of production exported (export propensity) rose from 9.7 % to 13.5 % (Net import reliance). The sector thus not only relies less on imports but also channels a larger part of its growing output to foreign markets. Specialisation within the EU is uneven: countries like Cyprus, Greece, Luxembourg and Denmark are heavily specialised in cheese exports, while others (Finland, Sweden, Portugal) remain far less specialised (Specialisation in 2025).

Conclusion

The 2015–2025 decade transformed EU cheese trade. Export value nearly doubled, driven above all by rising unit prices that reflect a move toward premium products. Traditional partners such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Switzerland remain crucial, but fast-growing markets like Ukraine, South Korea and Saudi Arabia are increasingly important. Although imports remain concentrated, new suppliers from Ukraine, Türkiye and New Zealand have added diversification, albeit with considerable volatility. On the domestic front, production value has soared well ahead of volume, export concentration has fallen, and the sector’s net-exporter position has strengthened markedly. Together, these trends paint a picture of a resilient, high-value and globally integrated EU cheese industry that is well positioned for the future.

Generated on 2026-07-28 based on data from tradedashboard.eu

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