EU TRADE EXPLORER

Market evolution: Essential oils and cosmetics (CN 33) — 2015–2025

Introduction

Chapter 33 of the Combined Nomenclature covers the entire breadth of essential oils, perfumery, cosmetic and toilet preparations. The decade from 2015 to 2025 saw the European Union's extra-EU trade in this category evolve into a powerful export-driven surplus, with values rising strongly despite periodic global disruptions. This report analyses the main dynamics – the expanding trade balance, the shifting geography of partners, the specialisation of EU member states, and the sector's growing integration with global demand. All data are taken from the Eurostat-based EU Trade Dashboard.

1 – A soaring surplus built on export momentum

Overall trade overview

Exports outpace imports, widening the surplus by 75 %

Between 2015 and 2025 EU extra-EU exports of CN 33 climbed from 27,123.8 million EUR to 46,119.6 million EUR (+70.0 %), while imports rose from 8,685.5 million EUR to 13,846.8 million EUR (+59.4 %). The trade balance consequently expanded from 18,438.2 million EUR to 32,272.8 million EUR – an increase of 75 %.

Indicator	2015	2025	Change
Exports (million EUR)	27 124	46 120	+70.0 %
Imports (million EUR)	8 686	13 847	+59.4 %
Balance (million EUR)	18 438	32 273	+75.0 %

Export prices rise faster than import prices, supporting value growth

Unit values reflect a quality-upgrading dynamic: the average export price increased from 13 662 EUR/t to 19 062 EUR/t (+39.5 %), whereas the average import price rose from 11 782 EUR/t to 15 560 EUR/t (+32.1 %). The EU therefore sells dearer and buys relatively cheaper, strengthening the surplus in value terms.

The United States and the United Kingdom remain the cornerstones, but China and the Gulf states surge

Top partners

Export partner	2015 (million EUR)	2025 (million EUR)	Change
United States	4 827	7 651	+58.5 %
United Kingdom	4 209	5 344	+26.9 %
China	700	2 959	+322.6 %
UAE	1 078	2 339	+117.1 %

While the US and the UK are still the largest customers, the most spectacular growth came from China (+322.6 %) and the United Arab Emirates (+117.1 %), illustrating the EU’s success in fast-growing consumer markets.

2 – Diversification of partners and resilience against shocks

Concentration & volatility

Import sources become much less concentrated

The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) for imports fell from 2 186 to 1 302 (−40.4 %), meaning the EU now spreads its imports across a wider range of suppliers. The United Kingdom’s share dropped by 6.1 % in value, while imports from China (+207.6 %), Brazil (+187.0 %) and Türkiye (+169.5 %) accelerated.

Import partner	2015 (million EUR)	2025 (million EUR)	Change
United Kingdom	3 081	2 894	−6.1 %
United States	1 783	2 585	+45.0 %
China	518	1 594	+207.6 %
Switzerland	1 846	2 202	+19.3 %

Export destinations also broaden, reducing dependency on a few markets

Export-side HHI declined from 737 to 625 (−15.2 %), confirming that growth is spread across many small and medium partners as well as the large ones. The share of “Other” partners outside the top 7 surged from 45.7 % to 48.2 % of total exports.

Price volatility and supply shocks are largely confined to marginal flows

Volatility bars

High coefficient-of-variation readings (e.g., UAE imports 1.05, Russia imports 0.79, Korea imports 0.85) are concentrated in minor trade lanes. The largest partners – the US (CV 0.06 on imports, 0.26 on exports) and Switzerland (0.04 on imports, 0.04 on exports) – display very stable trade patterns. Significant price shocks, such as the 2020 UAE import price event, accounted for less than 1.5 % of total imports, leaving the overall trade profile largely unaffected.

3 – Member-state specialisation: France leads, Mediterranean countries accelerate

Top reporters & specialisation

France remains the undisputed export champion, but Spain and Italy are catching up

France's extra-EU exports jumped from 7 987 million EUR to 14 503 million EUR (+81.6 %). However, Spain (+160.2 %) and Italy (+136.9 %) grew more than twice as fast, nearly tripling their exports.

Exporter	2015 (million EUR)	2025 (million EUR)	Change
France	7 987	14 503	+81.6 %
Ireland	5 623	7 314	+30.1 %
Germany	4 211	4 989	+18.5 %
Spain	2 052	5 339	+160.2 %
Italy	2 008	4 756	+136.9 %

Ireland's specialisation is high, but its trade is volatile

Ireland recorded the second-highest revealed symmetric comparative advantage (RSCA = 0.41), after France (0.48). Yet Irish exports collapsed temporarily in 2020 (from 5 484 million EUR in 2019 to 2 151 million EUR) before recovering, reflecting the influence of large multinationals' transfer-pricing decisions.

The Netherlands has become the EU's foremost import hub

Dutch imports rose by 168.2 %, from 979 million EUR to 2 625 million EUR, far outpacing other major importers. This reflects the Netherlands' role as a logistics and distribution gateway for non-EU cosmetics brands entering the single market.

Conclusion

Over the decade 2015-2025, EU trade in essential oils and cosmetics transformed into an even larger and more resilient surplus. Exports grew faster than imports, prices increased more on the export side, and the partner base became significantly more diversified. France, Spain and Italy drove the export expansion, while the Netherlands strengthened its position as an import hub. The sector's export propensity now approaches 100 %, underscoring its deep global integration. Looking ahead, the main risk is the concentration of high-value fragrance and odouriferous mixtures (CN 3302) in a few large flows, while the broad diversification of both markets and suppliers provides a sturdy buffer against individual shocks.

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If you need advice on European trade policy, or representation for your interests in Brussels, feel free to contact me at support@tradedashboard.eu. You can find my CV at this address.