



STATISTICS

DATA FEATURE

What Share of U.S. Consumed Food Is Imported?

Increasingly, the foods Americans eat are imported because bananas, coffee, chocolate, fish and shellfish, apple juice, cashew nuts, spices, and other imported foods are produced in greater quantity or less expensively abroad or, in some cases, cannot be produced in the U.S. Since 1980, there has been a general upward trend in average import shares for both crops and animal products. Some foods, such as fish, shellfish, coffee, cocoa, and spices, help boost overall import shares due to their relatively low domestic production volumes. Other food groups have lower import shares that reflect their greater domestic production volumes, such as dairy products, red meats, grains, vegetables, and sweeteners, all of which have import shares 15 percent or lower.

The share of imports consumed of each food or their combined amounts can be measured using two different approaches. The first calculates the imported food share of the total cost of foods and beverages consumed in the United States. The second, a volume-based approach, considers imported foods as a share of the total weight of all U.S.-consumed food.

Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. Each provides significantly different estimates from the other. The aggregate import share of U.S. food consumption in 2005 was 7 percent when based on value but 15 percent based on volume.

Import shares by volume are highest for fish and shellfish, 2000-05



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

Using the Value-based Approach

In the dollar-values approach, the wholesale cost of foods and beverages consumed in the U.S. is estimated by adding up domestic production values and the total import bill. The U.S. Bureau of the Census reports food imports in customs value—the closest equivalent to wholesale prices available. The value of domestically produced foods and beverages is estimated from their farm or wholesale values, depending on the food.

Import shares of U.S. consumed food are much higher when based on volume



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

The wholesale cost of fresh produce and other unprocessed food, for example, is based on their farm production value or farm cash receipts. The wholesale value of processed food and beverages is best approximated by the value of shipments of U.S. food manufacturers (net exports), reported in the Annual Survey of Manufactures by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

There are some disadvantages to this approach, however. Annual changes in the dollar's exchange rate can shift value-based import shares even if the actual composition or volume of imported food is unchanged. Another disadvantage stems from the value added in food processing by the cost of labor, capital inputs, and