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# Import Share Of U.S. Food Consumption Stable At 11 Percent

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## Abstract

As U.S. per capita consumption of food grew from an average 1,800 pounds per year in the early 1980s to more than 2,000 pounds in recent years, the import share of U.S. consumed food climbed from 8 percent to more than 11 percent. The import shares of U.S. consumption of animal products and food crops both increased in the past two decades, with the aggregate share of fruits and vegetables at least twice as large as that of animal products.

**Keywords:** Import share, food consumption, food imports.

## About the Author

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## The New American Diet

U.S. per capita food consumption grew from about 1,800 pounds per year in the early 1980s to more than 2,000 pounds in 2000. In this period, the average share of imports in U.S. food consumption climbed from approximately 8 percent to more than 11 percent. While the average U.S. resident consumed 20 percent more fruits, vegetables, and cereals over the past two decades, consumption of animal products increased by only 7 percent. In 2001, the U.S. import share of consumption for animal products was 4.6 percent, while the share for crops and products was 16 percent. These shares are up from 3.4 and 10 percent, respectively, in the early 1980s.

A gradual rise in the share of food crops and products and a decline in the share of meat and dairy products in U.S. food consumption occurred in the past 20 years. In 2000, crops and products made up 57 percent

of the average U.S. diet, and animal products comprised the remaining 43 percent. These relative shares were 54 and 46 percent, respectively, in 1981.

Specifically, U.S. per capita consumption of red meat fell from more than 9 percent of the average U.S. diet in the 1980s to less than 8 percent in recent years. Dairy products declined from 30 to 28 percent in the same period. On the other hand, the consumption share of vegetables rose from 19 percent to 21 percent, and grain cereals went up from 8 to 9.5 percent in that period. Clearly, the perceived health-related benefits of more plant fiber and less animal fat in diets shaped the pattern of U.S. food consumption. These long-term trends, moreover, tend to favor more imports of foreign food products, e.g., due to higher off-season fruit demand.

### Summary import shares of U.S. food consumption<sup>1</sup>

	Average 1981-85	Average 1986-90	Average 1991-95	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Average 1997-2001
	<i>Percent</i>									
Average import share of total food consumed	7.8	8.6	9.4	10.4	10.9	11.2	11.2	11.1	11.2	11.1
Animal products <sup>2</sup>	3.4	3.7	3.5	3.5	3.6	4.4	4.5	4.5	4.6	4.3
Red meat	6.7	8.1	7.3	6.4	7.1	7.7	8.2	8.9	9.3	8.2
Dairy products	1.9	1.8	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.9	2.9	2.7	2.8	2.6
Fish and shellfish	50.9	56.0	56.0	58.5	62.1	64.7	68.1	68.3	68.2	66.3
Animal fat	1.0	1.6	3.5	3.6	5.9	5.5	5.9	6.9	2.6	5.4
Crops and products <sup>3</sup>	11.5	12.6	13.9	15.6	16.3	16.3	16.3	16.2	16.4	16.3
Fruits, juices and nuts	14.1	17.9	17.0	16.9	18.8	18.4	21.0	21.9	21.4	20.3
Vegetables	4.7	6.0	5.9	7.8	7.9	9.0	9.0	8.7	9.4	8.8
Vegetable oils	15.5	17.6	17.4	19.3	19.4	16.3	16.9	18.3	15.5	17.3
Grain products	1.1	2.3	4.8	3.9	5.8	5.3	5.3	4.6	4.9	5.2
Sweeteners and candy	21.6	11.9	10.8	15.2	16.1	12.9	11.0	9.8	9.7	11.9

<sup>1</sup>Calculated from units of weight, weight equivalents, or content weight.

<sup>2</sup>Import shares of poultry and eggs are negligible, but accounted for. Red meats are estimated from carcass weights.

<sup>3</sup>Includes coffee, cocoa, and tea whose import shares are 100 percent; also includes wine and beer.

## Factors That Influence U.S. Food Imports

The import share of a food product is the ratio of its imported volume to total volume consumed.

Year-to-year effects on the demand for food imports include short-term changes in domestic food supply, the cost of imported food, and taste preferences, such as for food fads. Longer term factors that drive import demand include income growth, a sustained exchange-rate appreciation, and changes in diet that increase the demand for food products not readily available in large quantities in the United States, particularly tropical fruits and crops not available during the off-season.

Among the fastest growing U.S. food imports are red meats, fish, and shellfish. Imports of vegetables such as bell and chili peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, asparagus, onions, and olives have also risen significantly since 1990. Further, the import shares of fruits, wheat, rice, candy, wine, and beer jumped dramatically as U.S. tastes shifted. More reliable supplies from foreign sources, particularly during the off-season, improved shipping and storage technology; and wider U.S. ethnic diet preferences contributed to these import trends over time.

Helping drive the sharp rise in import share of U.S.-consumed foods from 1996 to 2001 were the robust U.S. economy and the strong dollar. The increase in the import share of red meats from 6.5 percent of red meat consumption to more than 9 percent (in carcass weight) during this period was also due to widespread liquidation of the U.S. cattle herd, which cut the domestic supply of processing beef. Also, the economic recession in many Asian countries diverted Australian and New Zealand meat to the U.S. market.

The phased lifting of tariffs on Mexican fruit and vegetable exports to the United States as mandated by the North American Free Trade Agreement induced growers in Mexico to ship more of their produce across the U.S. border. Mexico is now the source of 27 percent of U.S. fruit imports and 38 percent of vegetable imports. Tomatoes and bell and chili peppers lead vegetable imports from Mexico. Off-season fruit imports from Chile and Argentina, and vegetable imports from Peru, Ecuador, and other South American countries are driving up overall U.S. import shares of these crops. Latin American countries supply an additional 40 percent of U.S. imported fruits (in weight terms), chiefly bananas, grapes, and melons.

## Food Import Growth Patterns

Although U.S. per capita consumption of red meat dropped from an average 175 pounds per year in the early 1980s to 164 pounds in 2000, the import share of pork rose from 3 to 5 percent, and import share for lamb meat quadrupled between those years. Fish and shellfish import share reached 68 percent in 2001, up from 45 percent in 1980. Even beef's import share rose from 8 to 11.6 percent from 1996 to 2001.

The import share of fresh fruits also more than doubled from 9 percent in 1985 to 23 percent in 2001. Among the fastest growing are avocados, mangos, melons, grapes, and pears. For fruit juices—mainly orange, apple, and grape—overall import share rose from 11.6 to 32 percent in the past two decades. Among tree nuts, 49 percent of which were imported in 2001 versus only 27 percent in 1985, the import share of pecans shot up from 1.5 percent to 17 percent.

Equally dramatic growth in import share of vegetables occurred since 1985. For fresh and frozen vegetables

as a group, the share doubled from 8 percent to 17 percent in 2001. Tomatoes' import share reached 36 percent in 2001, up from only 21 percent in 1990. Asparagus' share almost quadrupled from 16 percent to 60 percent. For olives (processed), the respective shares are 43 to 60 percent. And for artichokes and spices, the corresponding estimates more than doubled.

From less than 1-percent import share in 1980, wheat and rice expanded significantly to 11 percent in 2001. Also, the import share of confectionery products quintupled, as did malt beverages. Import shares fell for cheese, vegetable oils, and sugar.

These overall rising trends in import shares of major foods are largely demand-driven, by both per capita U.S. income growth and the appreciation of the dollar over the past decade. At the same time, the need for export earnings has likewise induced foreign producers to supply the large U.S. market.

## Import share of U.S. food consumption

Selected items	1980	1985	1990	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Average imports, 1999-2000
	Percent										\$ million
Beef	8.7	8.0	9.7	8.1	7.9	9.0	9.9	10.6	11.0	11.6	2,151.3
Pork	3.3	7.1	5.6	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.9	4.4	5.2	5.1	633.2
Lamb	9.5	9.4	10.2	18.4	21.7	25.0	31.2	31.3	36.6	39.8	206.7
Fish and shellfish	45.3	53.8	56.3	55.3	58.5	62.1	64.7	68.1	68.3	68.2	9,341.1
Fresh and frozen	56.8	62.8	65.8	66.0	70.6	74.3	76.6	78.5	81.7	83.3	N.A.
Canned	21.8	34.9	36.0	30.8	29.8	33.0	36.1	43.8	38.4	35.7	N.A.
Dairy products	1.7	2.0	1.9	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.9	2.9	2.7	2.8	1,650.7
Cheese	5.8	5.6	4.8	4.7	4.5	4.1	4.5	5.3	4.8	5.1	706.5
Fruits--fresh and frozen	5.8	9.0	13.2	15.6	16.9	18.0	19.5	21.5	22.3	23.1	2,028.5
Citrus, fresh	2.1	3.1	3.6	7.3	6.7	7.5	8.2	13.6	11.8	12.5	220.4
Non-citrus, fresh	7.3	10.9	16.0	18.2	20.2	21.6	23.3	23.4	25.3	26.4	1,808.1
Apples	4.0	5.9	4.3	6.1	7.7	7.3	7.0	6.6	7.2	7.0	99.6
Avocados	1.6	1.6	7.3	11.6	12.0	14.1	18.4	31.0	26.0	29.8	83.3
Grapes	12.6	29.6	41.1	41.8	37.8	41.9	42.8	43.1	44.3	44.5	548.4
Melons	10.5	9.7	15.4	17.2	18.8	22.4	25.3	23.6	26.2	24.1	276.7
Pears	3.4	6.8	11.4	11.6	14.1	20.9	16.0	21.1	21.2	20.6	77.2
Strawberries	22.1	10.0	13.0	12.3	10.6	8.5	10.1	14.3	10.8	11.3	85.5
Fruits--processed	1.7	2.2	2.6	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.7	3.2	3.3	3.3	681.2
Fruit juices	11.6	50.4	48.7	27.2	27.2	32.8	28.9	34.9	31.9	31.5	734.4
Orange juice	8.9	55.4	56.1	19.3	15.1	20.5	17.1	21.6	20.8	17.4	238.1
Apple juice	19.3	60.3	58.0	52.1	53.5	62.2	63.3	60.3	61.6	63.4	239.9
Grape juice	2.0	11.3	33.7	21.5	47.7	62.1	29.9	55.0	39.3	41.1	64.8
Tree nuts	25.6	26.8	35.7	34.1	43.9	44.5	42.0	46.8	39.3	48.9	718.2
Pecans	0.3	1.5	8.7	25.7	27.3	21.9	21.7	23.4	24.5	17.2	68.3
Wine	20.7	23.1	13.0	15.8	18.8	23.0	20.7	20.0	21.4	22.6	2,191.9
Vegetables--fresh, frozen	5.9	8.0	9.6	11.2	13.6	13.3	15.5	14.7	14.0	16.6	2,793.4
Asparagus	10.8	16.2	29.8	53.3	48.8	49.3	54.4	57.0	59.0	59.7	117.9
Cucumbers	36.0	36.3	33.7	38.3	42.9	38.1	40.2	39.7	42.4	44.2	169.2
Onions	5.5	8.7	10.1	10.2	12.6	11.2	11.9	11.4	9.3	12.3	146.4
Peppers, bell	26.5	23.7	19.7	19.1	19.8	22.5	24.8	24.4	22.2	26.0	428.2
Potatoes	1.9	3.7	5.8	5.2	7.3	5.8	8.2	6.9	6.0	5.0	408.6
Squash	N.A.	N.A.	19.8	24.3	29.4	29.3	30.0	29.3	27.2	N.A.	117.9
Tomatoes	22.3	24.0	20.5	30.5	34.6	35.8	38.6	32.8	32.4	35.5	692.2
Vegetables--processed	1.7	3.3	1.9	1.7	1.5	1.8	1.8	2.2	1.8	2.0	1,996.9
Artichokes	20.6	23.2	25.7	39.0	42.5	41.9	50.4	46.3	47.9	48.6	66.4
Mushrooms	31.3	30.8	24.3	35.3	26.0	34.0	36.5	24.7	36.7	35.3	113.9
Olives	21.8	43.7	47.0	60.0	37.1	56.0	67.0	50.2	78.8	60.1	192.8
Vegetable oils	16.9	20.1	16.5	16.8	19.3	19.4	16.3	16.9	18.3	15.5	1,359.2
Olive oil <sup>1</sup>	96.6	98.2	103.1	109.6	106.5	105.9	104.9	104.4	104.9	105.0	384.2
Canola oil <sup>1</sup>	100.0	100.0	105.4	87.5	97.5	98.1	85.5	81.7	69.7	76.5	250.5

**Import share of U.S. food consumption—continued**

Selected items	1980	1985	1990	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Average imports, 1999-2000
											Percent
Spices	4.8	7.3	7.7	6.4	8.4	8.9	10.3	13.1	14.3	15.4	66.8
Wheat	0.3	2.1	4.1	6.9	9.3	9.4	10.4	9.3	8.7	10.7	252.3
Rice	0.3	3.4	5.1	7.2	10.3	9.0	9.4	8.3	9.4	11.0	178.6
Barley	3.3	3.5	7.7	23.7	21.4	23.4	17.5	16.1	17.0	13.9	79.8
Cane and beet sugar	45.4	34.9	29.9	19.6	29.3	28.4	22.0	18.2	16.4	15.5	542.3
Confectionery products	5.4	20.9	17.1	14.2	16.2	18.6	22.7	26.5	28.7	27.3	732.2
Malt beverages	2.6	4.2	4.5	5.8	6.5	7.2	8.3	9.0	9.9	10.7	2,095.7

N.A. = Not available.

<sup>1</sup>When some imports are re-exported and consumption falls below import levels, import share exceeds 100 percent.

Source: Economic Research Service, USDA.