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Exporter Guide for the Dominican Republic

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DISCLAIMER: the Office of Agricultural Affairs of the United States Department of Agriculture in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic prepared this report for U.S. exporters of domestic food and agricultural products. While every possible care was taken in the preparation of this report, information provided may not be completely accurate either because policies have changed since its preparation, or because clear and consistent information about these policies was not available. It is highly recommended that U.S. exporters verify the full set of import requirements with their foreign customers, who are normally best equipped to research such matters with local authorities, before any goods are shipped.

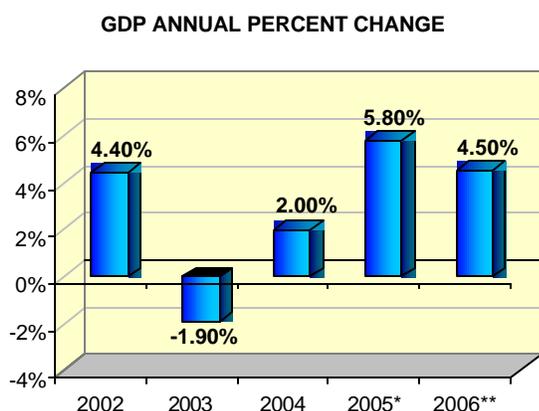
FINAL IMPORT APPROVAL OF ANY PRODUCT IS SUBJECT TO THE IMPORTING COUNTRY'S RULES AND REGULATIONS AS INTERPRETED BY BORDER OFFICIALS AT THE TIME OF PRODUCT ENTRY.

EXPORTER GUIDE TO THE CONSUMER FOOD MARKET IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

I. MARKET OVERVIEW

1.a Current Economic Situation

After the sharp economic contraction in 2002 and 2003 due to building economic problems exacerbated by a spectacular bank collapse and default, with allegations of corruption, the Dominican economy showed little, but favorable GDP performance in 2004 and the first half 2005. The record time in which most sectors have responded in a positive way has been dramatic and while many serious problems still exist, the recovery has been due to the confidence placed by the Dominican people on the new economic agents and the close coordination of monetary and fiscal policies.

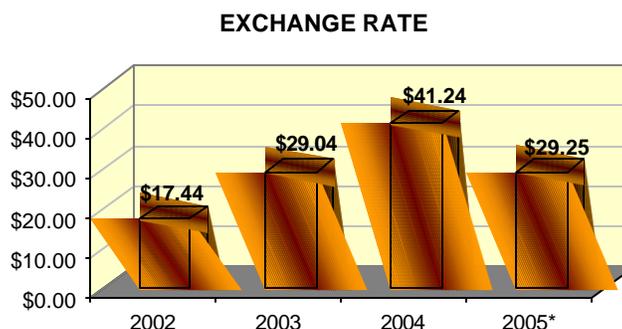


Source: Central Bank and IMF

* Until October 2005 ** Estimated Value

The Fernandez administration, which took power in August 2004, launched an economic adjustment and stabilization program aimed at restoring macroeconomic stability, a program that was renewed in late January 2005 with the signing of a standby arrangement with the International Monetary Fund. This program has imposed stringent adjustments, especially in public finance and the banking sector, the main sources of the imbalances that undermined stability and encouraged the outflow of capital in recent years.

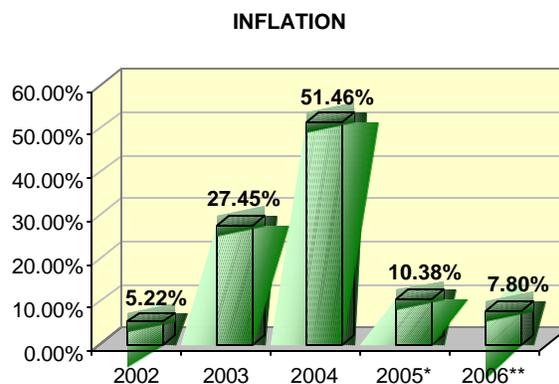
The Dominican peso has also gained value and stabilized at around 29 pesos to the dollar. GDP is forecast to grow by a respectable 5 percent in 2005, with inflation returning to near single digit levels (10.38%). Major structural problems still exist in the energy sector and large external debt remains a big burden, but the economy has been stabilized in a just a few months.



Source: Central Bank

* Until October 2005

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) variance for the month of June 2005 was only 0.06%. Cumulative inflation for the first half of the year was 0.82%, compared to 31.09% for the same prior year period. The annualized inflation rate maintained its downward trend, reaching -0.98% in June of this year. This shows that, after a period of economic crisis and high inflation, the Dominican economy had begun, as far back as the end of last year, a gradual process of deflation and correction in the prices of goods and services, in consonance with the levels of stability exhibited in the exchange rate.



Source: Central Bank and IMF

* Until October 2005

** Estimated Value

The adjustment in internal prices has not been more evident, due to being partially offset by continuously rising prices in the foreign oil markets.

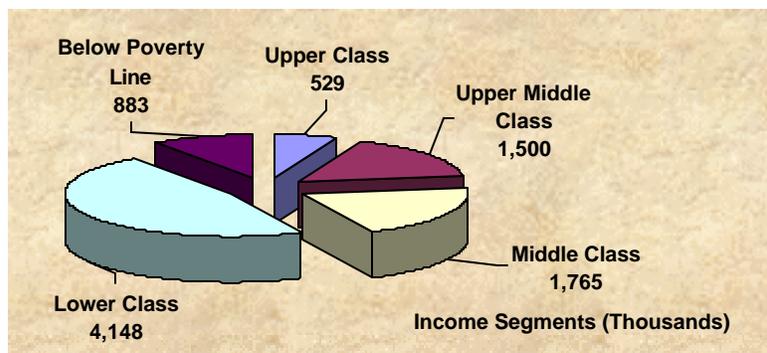
Movement toward ratification of DR-CAFTA in the Dominican congress came to almost a complete standstill, as all eyes turn toward the looming battle for ratification in the U.S. congress. Since the resolution of the high-profile dispute in late 2004, which resulted in the removal of a tax imposed on products that might use imported high fructose corn syrup; ratification of the agreement did not come until the United States ratified the agreement. Shortly after, the Dominican Lower House ratified the agreement in early August 2005.

1.b Demographics

Based on the 2002 census developed by the National Statistics Office, the Dominican population is estimated at 8.6 million in 2004, with 63 percent of the population (5.5 million) living in urban areas. It is estimated that the population of the Dominican Republic grows at a rate of 1.3 percent per year. The country suffers from marked income inequality; the poorest half of the population receives less than one-fifth of GNP, while the richest 10% enjoys nearly 40% of national income. Income distribution is heavily skewed toward the upper class and upper middle class, which means that a significant portion of the population does not have an income level that allows it to purchase relatively expensive imported food products. However, consumers in or above the middle class, a total of 3.8 million people, do regularly shop at supermarkets; eat in restaurants, and vacation in resorts, making them potential customers for U.S. exporters. Luxury goods can only be targeted at the upper class and upper middle class consumers, with a total population of about 2 million.

- Upper Class: around 6 percent of the population. These families and individuals are conspicuous consumers and have an income level that makes almost any product or service accessible.
- Upper Middle Class: this segment is about 17 percent of the population. They have an income level that makes expenditures on food products relatively insignificant, as a portion of their overall income.

- Middle Class: about 20 percent of the population. This class can afford most imported food products, but must watch budget overall expenditures on food.
- Lower Class: about 47 percent of the population. They live at a subsistence level and consume mostly basic foodstuffs.
- Below Poverty Level: around 10 percent of the population.



Source: National Statistics Office

Internal migration toward the city of Santo Domingo has been constant over the past decade. With approximately 31 percent (2.7 million) of the total population, the city of Santo Domingo and its surrounding suburbs offer the biggest concentrated market in the country with an accessible infrastructure. Santiago is the second largest market with 908,250 inhabitants. Other important cities are San Pedro de Macorís, La Romana, La Vega, Bonao, San Francisco de Macorís and Higüey. The construction of new highways, seaports and airports in recent years and the well-developed telecommunications infrastructure allows smooth distribution of products throughout the country.

1.c Market Size

When it comes to agricultural products, the Dominican Republic is the third largest market for U.S. products in the Western Hemisphere, behind Mexico and Canada, with calendar 2004 imports of approximately 499 million. Most of the growth in U.S. exports to the region in recent years has been in consumer-oriented products. Although imports of U.S. food and beverage products were off sharply in 2003, due to the domestic financial crisis mentioned before, but they recovered in 2004 and until August 2005 they were up 12.9% when compared to the same prior year period.

The total demand for food and drinks was estimated at US\$1.2 billion, with an average growth rate of 6 percent per year. It is estimated that about 45 percent of the all food and beverages consumed in the country are imported. About 50 to 55 percent of these imported products come from the United States, the rest comes from Canada, Europe, Asia, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. This ratio is expected to remain fairly stable both in terms of food imports and in U.S. participation.

1.d Advantages and Challenges in the Market

Advantages	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tourism sector is large and growing, increasing the demand for high quality food products. • Dominicans are greatly influenced by American culture and have a positive perception of U.S. products. • The Dominican Custom Service uses the WTO approved method of customs valuation, which requires that duties be applied to actual invoice prices of imported goods, rather than average or calculated price for imported goods. • Food distribution channels are becoming more efficient, facilitating the introduction of new products. • The DR-CAFTA will improve access for many US food products. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. New economic problems could reduce the demand for imported food products. 2. Globalization has allowed other regions, such as Europe, South American and Asia to expand sales into what has traditionally been a U.S. dominated market. 3. Tariff rate quotas to protect local producers restrict imports of some products like meat, dairy products, beans, rice and poultry. 4. The local Dominican food industry is becoming more efficient and more competitive, as it integrates new technologies into its production processes. 5. Sanitary and phytosanitary import permits are used as a non-tariff barrier to limit imports of meat and dairy products.

II. EXPORTER'S BUSINESS TIPS

2.a Business Customs

Most business conducted in the Dominican Republic is based on personal relationships. Business executives place great importance on personal contacts with suppliers. Many will not want to do business with someone considered rude or disrespectful. A warm handshake combined with conversation about the person's well being, family, etc. prior to starting the conversation related to business is considered a common courtesy.

Dominicans are extremely friendly and tend to prefer to first develop a certain level of personal relationship, which allows developing trustworthiness before compromising themselves.

U.S. suppliers should be prepared to have a local representative or distributor and personally travel to the DR. Even though it might not appear to be so, the DR business community is one of the most aggressive in the region. Quality and responsiveness in after-sales service have become increasingly important ingredients in effective marketing strategies.

Law 16-95 entails significant implications for foreign companies interested to distribute products or services in the Dominican market.

There are several methods for U.S. exporters to enter the Dominican market. One can use locally appointed distributors, a wholly owned subsidiary, joint venture partners, or Dominican importers and wholesalers who also own retail outlets. Law 173 seeks to protect local agents from the unjust termination of their agreements by their foreign principals. This law has a wide scope of application, comprising any type of agency, representation, distribution, license, concession, franchise or other agreement relating to products manufactured abroad or in the country.

2.b Consumer Taste

Dominicans have adopted much of the U.S. culture, such as music, sports, fashion and food trends. It is also very important to point out, that Dominicans are becoming more health-conscious and aware of food safety issues. People are demanding healthier food, with less saturated fat, cholesterol and sugar (carbohydrate) content.

There is the notion that products made in industrialized nations, such as the United States are more reliable in terms of quality. There is also a tendency, mainly among the middle and high-income classes which are the main users of imported products, to consume natural and healthy products.

2.c Food Standards and Regulations

Import Procedures & Product Registration

U.S. food and beverage products have good access to the Dominican market, except for sugar, pork, poultry, beef, beans, onions, dairy products, garlic and rice, which need import permits or “*no objection certificates*” that are difficult to obtain. The Dominican Ministry of Agriculture tightly controls imports of those products through a restrictive licensing system. Significant market potential exists for these products, which serve a very distinct market segment.

Consumer foods must be registered with the Ministry of Public Health (SESPAS), which issues a certificate (Sanitation Registration) that must be printed on the label of the product. Among the supporting documents needed when registering a food product are the following: U.S. certificate of free sale and of origin; manufacturer labels indicating qualitative and quantitative formulation; a copy of the letter of assignment or contract with a local agent (if one exists for the product); registration fees and product samples. All foreign documents should be legalized at the nearest Dominican consulate. It takes approximately nine months to process the Sanitation Registration. The cost of this registration may vary depending on the product.

The trademark must also be registered through the National Office of Intellectual Property of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. It takes approximately three months to register the trademark. It will be necessary to contract the services of a local legal firm to handle these processes. The cost of this registration may vary depending on the product.

All shipments to the Dominican Republic that exceed the value of US\$100.00 must be supported by the following documentation:

- Bill of Lading (English or Spanish)
- Consular Invoice (Spanish)
- Commercial Invoice (Spanish)
- Insurance Certificate (issued by a local insurance company)
- A certificate from the Central Bank (Import permit) and/or a No Objection Certificate issued by the Secretary of Agriculture.

A Dominican consular representative in the country of origin must certify the first three documents. Depending of the type of product, some other documents are required, such as:

- Phyto or Zoo Sanitary Certificate: for importing agricultural and animal products, such as fresh dried fruits, vegetables, plants and animals.
- Import Permit issued by the Department of Internal Taxes for alcoholic beverages.

The Phyto Sanitary Law (Law 4990 enacted on September 3, 1958) regulates the imports of plants, fruits, seeds, flowers and vegetables. Considering the sanitary situation of the country of origin, the Ministry of Agriculture may grant import permits when it deems that the import of said products is not harmful to plants and agricultural exploits in the country. The Ministry also has the power to establish quarantines. Cattle imports, for example, are subject to rigorous quarantine measures; being the importer responsible for the cost.

Clearing Customs

Customs clearance has been a significant problem in the Dominican Republic. Some things to watch out for include non-acceptance of commercial invoices as a basis for customs valuation and poor port organization and management. When things go smoothly, the customs clearance process takes approximately seven days, if all the required documentation has been submitted. This requires a Customs Agent who must be knowledgeable and in some cases who knows the officials involved with the processes for appraising, verifying and clearing of the merchandise. After 15 days in port, shipping lines assess a daily charge for the use of containers and port authorities also charge for the use of the space.

The appraisal of the imported merchandise are mostly based on the invoice price or a custom's appraisal list (Lista de Valuación Aduanera, LVA). If inspectors find out that the actual invoice price was changed, the importer will be penalized.

All imported merchandise is subject to payment of tariffs and other taxes. Tariffs are estimated based on the C.I.F. value (cost, insurance and freight) in Dominican Pesos at the current exchange rate. Tariffs range from 0 to 40 percent for most products, depending on the level of processing and the national interest on the product. The World Trade Organization (WTO) approved a technical rectification to allow the country to impose tariff rate quotas on several agricultural products mentioned at the beginning of this section. Imports exceeding the limits are subject to tariffs ranging from 74 percent and 162 percent.

Other taxes include:

- Exchange Commission (Import Permit): currently, it is 4.75 percent of the C.I.F. value of the imported products.
- Consular Invoice and the legal taxes (between US\$100 and US\$200 dollars): paid in the country of origin.
- A value-added tax (Impuesto de Transferencia de Bienes Industrializados y Servicios, ITBIS): 12 percent on the added value. This tax also applies to local production, however, local products considered to be staples are exempt. This represents, in some cases, represents an advantage for local products.
- Luxury Tax (Impuesto Selectivo al Consumo, ISC): ranges from 5 to 80 percent of the C.I.F. value of imports. It is applied to products that are considered luxury goods, such as alcoholic beverages, tobacco and caviar. This applies on the retail price and, to calculate it, the C.I.F. value is multiplied by a factor, which is determined by the Customs Department in an administrative manner.

Labeling Regulations

According to the Department of Norms and Standards (DIGENOR), all products must be properly labeled. Products packaged in the presence of the final consumer or packaged in the stores for sale on the same day are exempted from this requirement.

Labeling regulations require that all labels must provide the following information:

- All labels must be written in Spanish. A complementary label or counter-label may be used when the original label is not written in Spanish.
- Company brand.
- Product name
- Product description.
- Net weight/volume.
- List of ingredients and additives indicating the amounts used.
- The name and address of the producer and importer.
- Product batch code.
- Sanitation registration number (from the Department of Health).
- The expiration date.
- Instructions for product use.

III. MARKET SECTOR STRUCTURE

3.a Retail Food Sector

Consolidation has been the major trend of the Dominican Republic's distribution industry and is affecting all points on the traditional importer, wholesaler, retail supply chain. A notable result of the Dominican Republic's extended period of economic growth has been the evolution of the

supermarket industry in urban and high-income areas. This has created pressure along the supply chain to provide value-added service and reduce intermediary costs.

Many of the large retail companies have vertically integrated import and distribution activities through their parent company. Importer-distributors add value to their service by supplying a wide range of products. These distributors also supply other chains, and the converse happens as well, with supermarkets frequently purchasing goods from other distributors outside the parent group. Large importer-distributors frequently serve as exclusive agents for international brands.

The food distribution systems have experienced substantial changes in recent years. Supermarkets are becoming more important at the expense of the traditional system of warehouses and mom n' pop grocery stores. Foreign supermarket chains, such as PriceSmart from the United States and Carrefour from France, have retail outlets in Santo Domingo and Santiago. Local supermarket chains made extraordinary expansion efforts and adjustments to compete with foreign chains. They adopted modern technology for managing their operations and aggressive marketing strategies to attract new clients. Small local supermarkets are also designing strategies to compete with giants. At the end of 2001, the owners of a group of small supermarkets created an association to try to procure their products directly from suppliers and avoid going through local importers, assuring lower prices and gaining a competitive edge over large supermarkets.

The traditional retail food sector of the country is comprised of supermarkets (that targets middle and high income customers and also function as importers), warehouse owners (who supply the small grocery stores and also function as retailers) and the mom n' pop stores, known as *Colmados*. The *Colmados* are scattered all over the country. Their customer base is mainly middle and low income customers, however, they also function as convenience stores in almost all neighborhood in urban areas. Although they distribute about 70 percent of food products, they carry a vary narrow selection of products and are not generally a target for new products from U.S. suppliers.

The supermarket industry has advanced a lot in the country during the last ten to twelve years, to the extent that these are comparable to those of industrialized nations in various aspects, such as space, the variety of products they offer, operation technology, and aggressive marketing strategies to attract customers. The number of supermarkets and other stores selling consumer products in the mass segments of Santo Domingo and other cities of the country is also increasing.

3.b Hotel, Restaurants and Institutions

The Dominican hotel, restaurant and institutional sector, which is one of the largest in the Caribbean, is comprised of a diverse tourism sector, business hotels, upscale and more informal restaurants, and fast food franchises. Consumption of food and beverages in the Dominican Republic's (DR) non-tourist sector was estimated at US\$700 million in 2003. Consumption at all-inclusive resorts is estimated at US\$443.3 million, for a total of over US\$1 billion for the two sectors. Use of imported products in the institutional sector is limited, reducing the attractiveness of this segment to U.S. exporters.

As mentioned before, around 45 percent of the total food and beverage consumption in the country is imported and 50 to 55 percent comes from the United States. However, it is important to note that the country's food processing industry is improving its efficiency and competitiveness. This means competition from domestic products will likely grow. The recently negotiated free trade agreement between the United States and the DR will provide significant new openings for a wide range of products, as tariffs are lowered and non-tariff barriers on meat and dairy products are removed.

There are several trends in the HRI sector that bode well for future demand for imported food products. Over 40 percent of women have now joined the workforce and the percentage will continue to grow. This results in higher demand for meals outside the home and more convenience in retail food products. An increase in the number of Dominicans taking vacations in country is pushing up food consumption in the HRI sector. Increasing menu diversification, as Dominicans internationalize their consumption habits, is also increasing demand for imported products in the sector. Fast food is well established in the market, and there is an increase in the consumption of pizzas, hamburgers and other types of fast food.

SUB-SECTOR PROFILES

Resorts

The resort/hotel sector is the largest market segment in this area, with approximately 100 hotels and around 35,000 rooms. The Dominican Republic is receiving increasing worldwide recognition as a premier vacation destination, which has made it an attractive venue for fairs, conferences, conventions and international events. These factors contribute to an increasing flow of business people to the country.

Almost all the hotels located outside the city of Santo Domingo are all inclusive hotels. Most of them are located in the north and east side of the country. Some of the chains that have a few hotels in the country import part of the food used.

Business Hotels

Most of the business hotels are in the capital city, Santo Domingo. They are basically business hotels but are used by tourists interested in the Colonial City and other tourist attractions in Santo Domingo. Most are part of large worldwide hotel chains.

There are several large hotel projects also in planning in the Santo Domingo area, with the most important being the Malecón Center complex on the waterfront, which is now completed. The landmark 194,000 square meters residential, commercial and high-rise hotel complex has three 30-story towers and an ocean view terrace. The Malecón Center features five movie theatres, 175 store locations, office space, and restaurants. Hilton is operating a 22-floor, 228 room hotel in the complex, with gymnasium, casino, and meeting rooms with capacity for 1,300 persons.

Restaurants

Santo Domingo has an extensive up-scale restaurant sector, which caters to the wealthier classes, businesses and tourists. All of them have international menus and individual specialties. Ethnic restaurants include German, Arabic, Argentine, Spanish, French, Italian, Mediterranean, Mexican and Chinese.

Restaurants offer good opportunities for exporters from the United States. To meet the needs for international dishes, they import beef, fish and seafood, pasta, and hams. Since these restaurants do not function as chains and purchases are small, they buy almost all products needed through importer/distributors.

The general trend towards eating out has led to the opening of many small restaurants focusing on the lunch crowd, independent cafeterias, cafeterias located inside businesses, and cafeterias in supermarkets. These establishments provide local food, sandwiches, and snacks at affordable prices to working-class Dominicans.

Fast Food

Fast food restaurants are the fastest growing sector in the food service industry. Foreign fast food chains, mostly from the United States, started in the Dominican Republic in 1994 and have been very well received by Dominicans. Over 48 of these establishments have been opened, mostly in Santo Domingo and Santiago. The entry of foreign fast food chains has spurred the development of local businesses, although they tend to specialize in local popular foods. Many of them import their own products, primarily in the case of hamburger, meats, chickens, potatoes, sauces and ice cream. Fresh vegetables and bread are procured domestically.

Institutions

Many large businesses have set up cafeterias in order to offer food to their employees. These are independently run. Some free trade zones and industrial parks have also begun to install cafeterias, with the objective of offering inexpensive food of an acceptable quality. These cafeterias are more oriented to serving traditional dishes, with over 90 percent of ingredients being produced domestically. In this category there is limited opportunity for U.S. exporters, except for basic items and condiments offered at cut-rate prices. The handling of food in prisons and public hospitals has not been privatized and most inputs are sourced domestically.

IV. BEST PRODUCTS PROSPECTS

The following products are the ones, which have shown the highest average growth during the six months of 2004 and 2005.

PRODUCT	JANUARY - AUGUST COMPARISONS		%
	2004	2005	
SNACK FOODS (EXCL NUTS).....	3,009	5,262	74.85
BREAKFAST CEREALS & PANCAKE MIX.....	1,224	2,217	81.07
RED MEATS, FRESH/CHILLED/FROZEN.....	2,477	6,167	148.97
POULTRY MEAT.....	2,529	5,513	118.01
DAIRY PRODUCTS.....	9,884	13,767	39.28
FRESH FRUIT.....	797	2,384	198.97
FRUIT & VEGETABLE JUICES.....	2,447	2,970	21.37
WINE & BEER.....	2,673	3,253	21.74
PET FOODS (DOG & CAT FOOD).....	329	686	108.17
SALMON, WHOLE OR EVISCERATED.....	155	657	324.40

Source: Prepared based on data from FAS/USDA BICO Report

There are other high-value products imported from the United States, which show good sales potential, such as Diet/healthy products, although not present in large quantities. There are few products from the United States, which have not yet been introduced into the Dominican market. The Dominican Republic usually follows the same trend as the United States.

V. KEY CONTACTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Please, also refer to our other current food market related reports: Food and Agricultural Import Regulations and Standards, Retail Sector Report and the HRI Food Service Sector Report.

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