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Report Highlights:

The hotel, restaurant, and institutional sector in the United Arab Emirates remains one of the most dynamic in the region and presents significant opportunities for U.S. suppliers. Population growth and increased tourism, coupled with becoming a vibrant center for conventions, hospitality, and business development, should all continue to propel the sector forward in 2026 and beyond.

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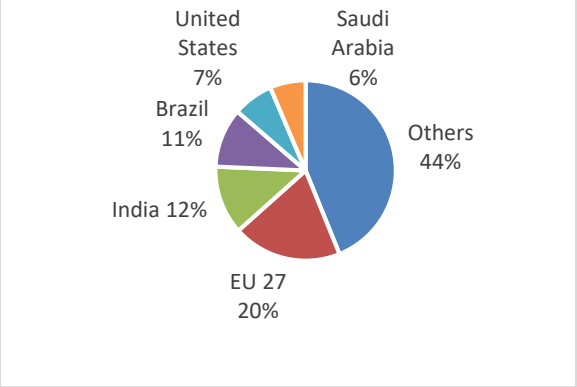
Executive Summary

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the second largest economy in the Arab world after Saudi Arabia, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of $548.6 billion and a projected growth rate of 3.7 percent in 2025. Foreign nationals comprise almost 89 percent of the population. Approximately 80 percent of the UAE's agricultural products are imported. In 2024, the United States exported $1.4 billion in agricultural and related products to the UAE, making it the largest export market for U.S. agricultural products in the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Imports of Consumer-Oriented Products

The UAE imported $16.2 billion in consumer-oriented products in 2024. Primary suppliers are the European Union, India, Brazil, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. The market is highly competitive but significant potential for U.S. export growth exists, including in dairy products, beef and beef products, poultry meat and products, fresh fruits, and tree nuts.

Top Exporting Countries to the UAE



Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Sector

Food Retail Industry

The UAE's food e-commerce retail sales reached $1.1 billion in 2024. The UAE's grocery retail market revenue stood at $18 billion in 2024.

Food Processing Industry

More than 570 food and beverage processors, relying heavily on imported commodities and ingredients, operate in the UAE and produce 5.96 million metric tons annually.

Food Service Industry

The UAE food service market was valued at $8.5 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach $14.2 billion by 2032, growing at a compound annual growth rate of 6.25 percent from 2025 to 2032.

Quick Facts in 2024

Consumer-Oriented Products Imports: $16.2 billion

Top 10 Consumer-Oriented Products Imports

Dairy	$2.0 billion
Beef and Beef Products	$1.6 billion
Poultry Meat and Products	$1.3 billion
Fresh Fruit	$1.2 billion
Tree Nuts	$1.1 billion
Bakery Goods	$857 million
Soup and Food Preparations	$832 million
Spices	$695 million
Chocolate and Cocoa Products	$663 million
Fresh Vegetables	$597 million

Food Industry by Channels

Retail food industry	$18.1 billion
Food service: hotel, restaurant, and institutional	$18.8 billion
Food processing	$7.6 billion
Food and agricultural exports	$16.3 billion

Top Retailers: Carrefour, Lulu Hypermarket, Nesto Hypermarket, Union Co-operative Society, Sharjah Co-operative Society, Al Madina Hypermarket, Emirates Co-operative Society, ADCOOOP

GDP: $548.6 billion
GDP per capita: $53,916
Population: 11.4 million

Sources: Trade Data Monitor, Euromonitor, Market Data Forecast, International Monetary

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
UAE is a modern transit hub for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	Specialized labeling and restrictive shelf-life requirements
U.S. products considered high quality	Long shipping time and high freight costs
Opportunities	**Threats**
Import regulations transparent and relatively straight-forward	Regulations evolve, subject to change without notice
Higher per capita incomes create demand for diverse and high-quality food	Proximity to lower-cost suppliers in India, Europe, and MENA

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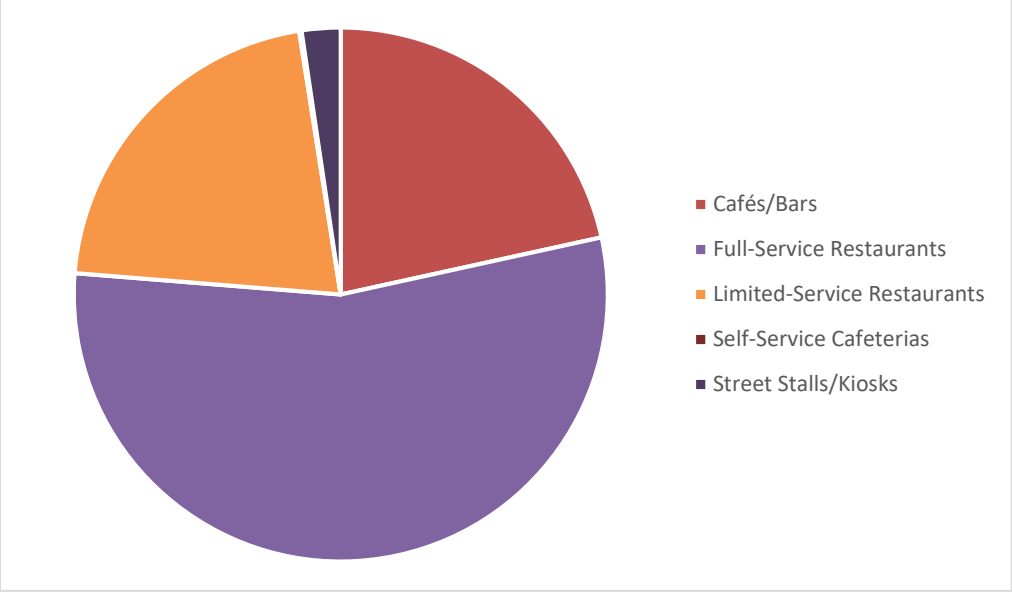
SECTION I. MARKET SUMMARY

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) benefits from its membership in the Pan-Arab Free Trade Area and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and has the second-largest economy in the Arab world after Saudi Arabia. It stands out as a well-developed nation, strategically positioned at the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, boasting exceptional infrastructure facilitating the smooth import, export, and transit of goods within the region and beyond. According to the International Monetary Fund, the UAE has a population of 11 million. The UAE relies heavily on food imports, with around 90 percent of its food coming from abroad. Agriculture contributes minimally to GDP.

In 2024, the UAE consumer food service sector demonstrated robust growth, driven by rising disposable income, sustained population expansion, and robust and growing tourism. Food service sales reached $17.8 billion, supported by a varied and highly competitive landscape of more than 17,300 outlets (Figure 1). Value-seeking behavior increased as consumers faced rising costs and delivery fees. Operators have adjusted with subscription offers, and targeted promotions while continuing to invest in digital ordering, AI-driven personalization, and cloud kitchens.

Figure 1: Consumer Food Service by Type in 2024



Source: Euromonitor

The sector is forecast to expand to $20.6 billion by 2029, supported by strong consumer appetite for convenience, international flavors, and premium dining experiences. This growth will continue to drive demand for high-quality imported ingredients. Profitability pressures will persist for business operators as rising rents and delivery aggregator commissions weigh on profitability. Sustainability expectations from packaging to food waste reduction will increasingly shape purchasing and menu decisions.

The UAE's hotel, restaurant, and institutional (HRI) sector remains one of the most dynamic in the region and presents significant opportunities for U.S. suppliers of premium meats, specialty ingredients, dairy, sauces, snacks, and beverages.

In the first half of 2024, Dubai Municipality reported that 5.2 million tons of food were imported into the emirate of Dubai alone across 268,084 shipments. This represents a 15 percent increase compared to 2023, when the city received 533,790 shipments from 160 countries, feeding more than 25,000 food establishments. Dubai Municipality also reported that 90 percent of all food and beverage imports destined for the UAE pass through Dubai.

The local Emirati population is less than 10 percent of the overall population. In 2024, Dubai welcomed 18.7 million visitors. According to Dubai's Annual Visitor Report 2024, the emirate's business tourism, mega-events, festivals, and the continued popularity of shopping and luxury tourism drove visitor counts. In 2024, Dubai's Gastronomy Industry Report noted that 1,200 new restaurants were licensed in the emirate and 19 earned a Michelin star. The report also posited that Dubai may rank second only to Paris as the world's leading gastronomy capital, surpassing more established locales such as London, New York, and Tokyo.

Dubai is a prominent destination for events, conferences, and international exhibitions, drawing a significant number of visitors and reinforcing its status as a global hub for major international gatherings. The Dubai World Trade Centre hosts 2.6 million visitors at more than 500 events each year. Dubai's hospitality scene features over 820 hotels with more than 150,000 rooms. A strong mix of international and homegrown hotel brands reflects the UAE's position as a global tourism hub. Major operators such as Marriott International, Hilton, Accor, IHG, and Hyatt maintain extensive portfolios across the country. In 2025, the UAE's hotel occupancy rate is projected to increase to 81 percent, which would represent a 4.6 percent increase from 2024.

The UAE's strong economy, well-developed infrastructure, and diverse culture have established it as the culinary hub for the region. It has become a global travel center, earning high rankings in international tourism competitiveness indexes. Culinary guides, such as the Michelin Guide and Gault & Millau, have continued to boost the popularity and sales of full-service restaurants in the UAE. In 2023, Dubai Municipality launched an annual restaurant food safety rating program, certifying "elite" eateries. The municipality awards the "DM Food Elite" to restaurants that meet high food safety and nutrition standards while also demonstrating environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and innovation.

The UAE's food service market in 2024 was valued at $18 billion, divided into seven categories. According to Euromonitor, Independent Consumer Food Service have the largest share of the total sector sales at $13 billion (Table 1).

Table 1: UAE Food Service Sales by Category, 2020 to 2024 (USD Millions)

Category	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Chained Consumer Food Service	3,134.4	3,708.8	4,241.1	4,747.2	4,967.6
Independent Consumer Food Service	7,442.7	9,161.6	11,289.2	12,674.0	13,073.0
Cafés/Bars	2,388.0	2,961.7	3,727.8	4,184.4	4,324.9
Full-Service Restaurants	5,734.1	6,988.3	8,392.8	9,459.2	9,821.8
Limited-Service Restaurants	2,338.2	2,791.1	3,267.8	3,624.0	3,735.5
Self-Service Cafeterias	55.6	62.4	67.8	72.8	76.7
Street Stalls/Kiosks	61.2	66.9	74.0	80.9	81.7

Source: Euromonitor

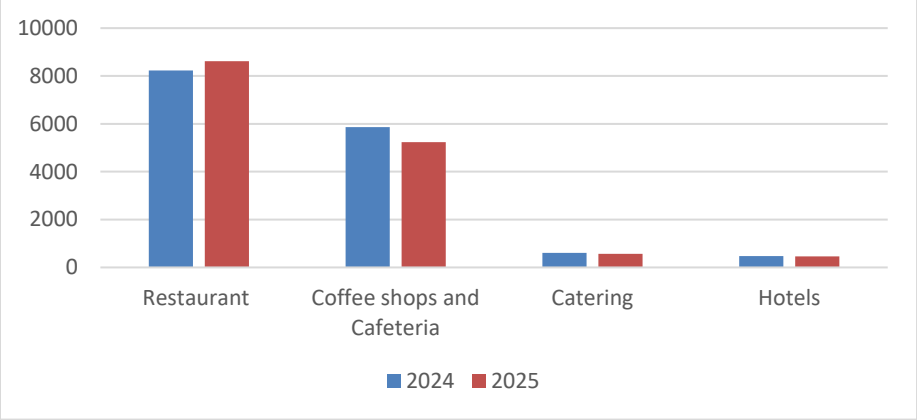
The data shows that in consumer food service by location, and retail outperformed other categories in 2024, increasing by 5 percent to $8.9 billion. Consumer food through standalone also grew by 5 percent to $4.2 billion. Consumer food service through standalone has been steadily growing throughout the past several years and suffered only a temporary downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consumer food service through leisure has not yet fully recovered to pre-pandemic figures.

In the UAE, healthy fast-food concepts are gaining traction as health-conscious consumers seek affordable, nutritious meal options amidst rising living costs. Fast-food chains are responding by offering healthier choices. Fine dining is also on the rise, driven by the influx of tourists eager to experience the city's luxurious dining culture.

UAE restaurants are investing in e-commerce, with aggregators such as Noon, Talabat, and Careem providing reliable food-delivery services. The latest entry to the market, Keeta, launched in Saudi Arabia in 2024 and in Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE in 2025. This shift towards online ordering is expected to remain a long-term trend.

According to Dubai Municipality, the city has 8,617 restaurants, 5,240 coffee shops & cafeterias, and 467 hotels. There has been an increase in the number of restaurants in Dubai in 2025, while coffee shops and cafeterias have seen a decline in outlets (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Dubai Food Service Establishments by Category, 2024–2025



Source: Dubai Municipality

It is important to note that HRI growth is occurring across the wider UAE. Other emirates, particularly Abu Dhabi and Ras Al Khaimah, are rapidly expanding their hospitality footprints and contributing significantly to national sector demand. Abu Dhabi continues to increase hotel capacity and develop major cultural and entertainment districts that attract both residents and international tourists. Meanwhile, Ras Al Khaimah is poised for substantial future HRI expansion through the development of its large-scale integrated resort project, which is expected to include the region's first full casino. This project alone is anticipated to generate a sharp rise in hotel openings, food service demand, and inbound tourism, underscoring that the UAE HRI sector growth extends well beyond Dubai, and is increasingly driven by multiple fast-developing emirates.

Table 2: Advantages and Challenges for U.S. Products in the UAE's Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Sector

Advantages	Challenges
Thriving tourism sector brings in a high volume of international visitors.	Highly competitive landscape, which could be a challenge for smaller and independent businesses.
Attractive business environment focused on sustainability.	Operational costs high, especially rents that have seen a significant rise over the last year.
Food service market is highly diversified with 17,361 outlets, catering to more than 200 nationalities.	Reliance on third-party platforms for delivery service can substantially affect operating costs and introduce limited control over customer experience.
Strong infrastructure and logistics that facilitate smooth food service operations, as well as growing integrated digital platforms serving a larger customer base.	Lack of interest from some U.S. exporters, who are unwilling to accept small orders and consolidate shipments. Significant competition from Europe, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and local regional processors exists due to more flexible pricing and lower freight costs.

A high disposable income is driving demand for premium dining.	All imported food products to the UAE must comply with strict GCC standards, including, but not limited to, product registration, Arabic labeling, and halal certificates for meat products.

SECTION II. ROAD MAP FOR MARKET ENTRY

Entry Strategy

The Foreign Agricultural Service's Regional Office in Dubai (FAS Dubai) offers resources to assist U.S. suppliers in staying informed and up to date about the latest news, trends, and regulations. U.S. suppliers are encouraged to conduct market research to assess the potential for their products in the UAE. It is advisable to gain an understanding of the overall business environment, market size, dynamics, consumption patterns, food import regulations, and procedures. Following a comprehensive market analysis, it is recommended to visit the country and engage directly with local industry stakeholders through in-person meetings.

Attending and participating in trade shows is another good opportunity for U.S. suppliers to build contacts with local industry and meet potential buyers. Gulfood is the largest annual food show in the world and is attended by countries all over the region and world. Gulfood Manufacturing is the largest trade show to the UAE that specializes in food ingredients for further processing. ISM Dubai is a major international trade exhibition dedicated to sweets, confectionery, snacks, and related food products. Finally, the Future Food Forum is a small but impactful annual gathering for local food processors in Dubai.

Market Structure

In the UAE market, the flow of U.S. food products starts with U.S. suppliers who export goods to consolidators. These consolidators act as intermediaries, managing logistics and ensuring cost-effective shipping. Upon arrival in the UAE, they distribute the goods to local wholesalers, importers, and retailers, who handle customs clearance and warehousing.

The UAE also serves as a re-export hub, facilitating the distribution of U.S. products throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The strong UAE hospitality industry drives demand for high-quality imported ingredients in the HRI sector. Hotels and restaurants prioritize premium U.S. products to meet consumer expectations for diverse and fresh offerings. Ultimately, these products reach consumers through fine dining, hotel meals, or institutional services, creating a seamless supply chain that connects U.S. suppliers to consumers across the region.

Distribution

The food distribution system in the UAE is influenced by the country's significant dependence on imports, with more than 85 percent of its food supply sourced from abroad. Shipments enter through

major ports, particularly Jebel Ali Port in Dubai, one of the region's busiest logistics hubs. Imported food products are registered and cleared through Dubai Municipality's Food Import and Re-Export System or the national ZAD platform, which oversees labeling, testing, and safety compliance.

After inspection, goods typically move into large logistics free zones such as JAFZA or KIZAD, where they are stored, repackaged, or processed before reaching the market. This infrastructure allows Dubai to operate as both the UAE's primary entry point for imported food and a re-export hub for the broader GCC, East Africa, and South Asia. From there, products flow to a network of importers and distributors that supply the country's major supermarkets, hypermarkets, hotels, restaurants, cafés, and institutional buyers such as airlines and catering companies. The UAE maintains one of the most advanced cold-chain and distribution systems in the region, ensuring a constant flow of global ingredients into retail and HRI channels despite the country's challenging climate and minimal domestic production.

Company Profiles and Company Products

Yum! Brands Inc. held the largest share of the UAE food service market in 2024, with brands such as KFC, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut. The top five companies account for a total of 33 percent of the food service market in the UAE. (Table 3). The company continues to lead the sector despite a decline in market share over the last three years. Restaurant Brands International Inc. has increased its share from 6.4 percent to 7.9 percent, marking the most significant growth among major players.

Table 3: Top 10 Consumer Food Service Chains in the UAE by Market Share

Company Name	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Yum! Brands Inc.	12.5	12.5	12.9	12.0	11.2
Restaurant Brands International Inc.	6.4	5.8	5.4	7.5	7.9
McDonald's Corp.	8.5	7.5	8.1	8.2	7.0
Starbucks Corp.	4.3	4.3	4.5	4.1	3.5
Doctor's Associates Inc.	4.4	4.1	3.9	3.5	3.4
Brinker International Inc.	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.7	2.7
Coca-Cola Co.	2.2	1.9	1.9	1.9	1.9
Al Khaja Group	1.6	1.6	1.7	1.7	1.7
Papa John's International Inc.	1.3	1.9	1.7	1.6	1.5
Nando's Group Holdings Ltd.	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.5
Others	54.6	56.2	55.6	55.5	57.7

Source: Euromonitor

McDonald's Corp. and Starbucks Corp. experienced gradual declines, from 8.5 percent to 7.0 percent and from 4.3 percent to 3.5 percent, respectively. Other established brands, including Doctor's Associates Inc. and Brinker International Inc. maintained smaller but steady shares.

SECTION III. COMPETITION

Due to low domestic production the UAE relies on imported food, the top consumer-oriented products importers into the UAE are the European Union (EU), India, Brazil, and the United States.. In Dubai, operating costs remain high, a steady flow of international visitors fuels the market, and it has one of the most diverse populations in the world, with more than 200 nationalities.

Tourism alone plays a significant role: In 2024, Dubai welcomed a record 18.72 million international overnight visitors. The local restaurant scene has also been expanding quickly, with nearly 1,200 new restaurant licenses issued in 2024. This momentum has helped Dubai build a strong reputation as a global dining destination, reinforced by the 106 restaurants featured in the 2024 Michelin Guide. This combination of tourism growth, cultural diversity, and a rapidly evolving culinary landscape continues to drive strong demand for imported ingredients.

The UAE market is highly fragmented with no one brand failing to garner more than a 12 percent share. A handful of regional chains such as Hatam and Karachi Darbar remain competitive; however, the main shares go to international brands like Pizza Hut at 11.3 percent, Chili's at 8.7 percent, McDonald's at 7.3 percent, and KFC at 5.9 percent. For more information on trade statistics, visit FAS's Global Agricultural Trade System, Trade Data Monitor, UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, and Dubai Government Data Statistics Center.

SECTION IV. BEST PRODUCT PROSPECTS

Table 4: Category A Products Present in the Market That Have Good Sales Potential (USD Millions)

Product Category	2024 Imports from the United States	2024 Total Imports	Key Constraints for Market Development	Market Attractiveness for U.S. Exporters
Beef and Beef Products	$56	$1408	Australia, India, Pakistan and Brazil are the top competitors.	The United States has an increasingly diverse portfolio of top-quality beef.
Seafood Products	$13	$796	Price competition from India, Thailand, Norway, China, and the EU.	There is a growing demand for high-quality and varied seafood products in the UAE, driven by the expanding number of hotels and the rise of fine dining establishments.

Dairy Products	$53	$2022	Strong competition from the EU and limited consumer awareness of the diverse range of U.S. dairy products.	The United States has an expanding portfolio of premium dairy ingredients while the UAE imports significant volumes of dairy products, offering substantial potential for U.S. dairy across all sectors.
Fresh Fruits	$37	$1203	Strong price competition from neighboring countries.	With a growing preference for fresh food products, retailers have also noted that consumers are willing to pay a premium for good-quality fruits and vegetables.
Poultry Meat and Products	$81	$1298	Strong competition from Brazil.	U.S. competitive price and high quality of chicken leg quarters, especially in catering services.
Tree Nuts	$556	$1080	Competition from other tree nuts suppliers.	U.S. tree nuts offer competitive pricing and exceptional quality. The UAE is a key re-export hub for distributing tree nuts.
Bakery goods, cereals, and pasta	$36	$856	Strong competition from the EU and Saudi Arabia stems from large-scale production, low-cost shipping and competitive pricing.	Preference for U.S. products because of their safety and high quality.

Source: Trade Data Monitor

Table 5: Category B Products Not Present in Significant Quantities but with Good Sales Potential (USD Millions)

Product Category	2024 Imports from the United States	2024 Total Imports	Key Constraints for Market Development	Market Attractiveness for U.S. Exporters

Coffee, Roasted, and Extracts	$6.7	$310	Price competition from other coffee-producing countries.	Growing number of coffee shop chains in the UAE and an increasing interest in specialty coffee.

Source: Trade Data Monitor and Euromonitor

SECTION V: KEY CONTACTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

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USDA Cooperators, State and Regional Trade Groups, and Chambers of Commerce

U.S. State Regional Trade Groups
American Business Council of Dubai and the Northern Emirates
Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Attachments:

No Attachments