Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

One Country One Priority Product

Tunisia

Harissa *(Capsicum annuum)*

General overview

Harissa is a culinary symbol of Tunisia, rooted in tradition and identity. Made from crushed chili peppers, its name derives from the Arabic word harasa, meaning "to crush." Used in dishes like couscous and served with bread as a condiment, Harissa is both a staple of daily cuisine and an ambassador of Tunisia's gastronomic heritage. It reflects centuries-old practices and continues to bridge domestic and diaspora markets.

Status of the harissa in Tunisia

Chili peppers (Capsicum annuum) are grown on an average of 16 100 hectares, producing approximately 311 000 tonnes annually. About 10 000 farmers, mostly smallholders, cultivate chili using both local and hybrid varieties. Harvest is manual primarily done by women and occurs from July to October, peaking in September. Up to five pickings per cycle are possible. Production is concentrated in Cap Bon, central, and central-western regions.

Production (MoA 2010)

- Chili cultivation spans ~16 100 ha, yielding 311 000 tonnes per year
- ~10 000 farmers involved, combining chili with other seasonal crops
- Manual harvesting, largely performed by women, from July to October
- Main regions: Cap Bon, central, and central-western Tunisia
- Up to five pickings per season; mix of local and hybrid varieties

Transport

- 15–20 percent of chili production goes to industrial Harissa
- Remainder used in fresh markets, drying, or traditional Harissa
- Transport handled by processors or collection centers
- Artisans source directly from farmers or markets (unrecorded volume)

Processing

- Harissa is made via industrial and artisanal methods
- 27 industrial canneries, 17 active in 2022, with 3 600 tonnes per day capacity
- Annual average processing volume: 66 600 tonnes
- Conversion rate: Two kilograms of fresh chili produce one kilogram of harissa
- Artisanal production involves 1 000+ registered producers, likely more informally
- Industrial season: August–October, after tomato processing
- Resource-intensive (water, energy)

Marketing and trade

- No Harissa imports; entire domestic consumption covered by local production

Industrial Harissa:

- ~10 000 tonnes consumed locally
- 42 percent sold domestically via wholesalers, retailers, and traditional outlets
- 58 percent exported, mainly to Libya and France
- Artisanal Harissa: sold in glass jars or bulk via fine groceries, markets, and online
- Consumer preferences driven by price, color, heat level, and aromatic quality

Challenges

- Limited regulation and inconsistent production standards
- Weak branding and marketing at the international level
- Lack of integration of traditional artisans into formal markets
- Fragile supply chains and logistics
- Limited international market access

Key activities

- Technical assistance for sustainable farming and best practices
- Market access facilitation to enhance export potential
- Regulatory support for certification and quality control
- Training programme for farmers and small-scale producers

Cultural importance and local consumption

"Harissa, a mainstay of Tunisian gastronomy, stands out not only as a condiment, but also as a symbol of national culinary identity. The term harissa, derived from the Arabic harasa meaning "to crush", reflects the ancestral method of preparing this red pepper-based paste. It is used in many dishes, such as couscous, and is often served at the table as a condiment alongside bread.

Coordination and key stakeholders

- Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy
- Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries
- Tunisian Canned Food Industries Group
- Chili farmers and agricultural cooperatives
- Industrial processors and artisanal producers
- Exporters and retailers

Target areas for partnership and investment

Production

- Support farmers to enhance chili quality and yields
- Invest in production infrastructure

Processing

- Research and develop new Harissa product lines

Marketing and trade

- Invest in marketing campaigns and collaboration with chefs and influencers
- Develop eco-friendly packaging and improve logistics

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