

[Dutch mussel industry booming](#)

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The mussel industry is booming in the Netherlands, with production and pricing leveling out - so much so that the bivalves are now referred to as "black gold" in the areas where they're cultivated.

The Netherlands produces around 50,000 metric tons (MT) of blue mussels (*Mytilus edulis*) per year, the majority of which (97 percent) are grown on the seabed and harvested by dredging. The Dutch mussel fleet operates 60 specialist ships to undertake this task. Overall, the European Union produces 550,000 MT of mussels annually, with Spain, France and Italy being the top producers.

Rope cultivation of mussels is relatively new to the Netherlands and was introduced principally as a means to capture additional spat or seed, following major issues with environmentalists, who feared that too little was being left available for local bird populations.

The majority of mussel seed is collected annually in the Wadden Sea in the north of the country, and transferred to shallow on-growing plots for on-growing. Roughly 60 percent is on-grown in the Wadden Sea and the remaining 40 percent in the estuarine waters of the Oosterschelde in the southwest. They take roughly two years to grow to harvest size.

The amount of seed available to harvest is based on an annual scientific stock assessment and a quota system. This fluctuates naturally from year to year, so mussel production is supplemented by imported seed.

There had been concerns that importing seed could result in an alteration of the genetic makeup of the local mussels, but the latest research undertaken by Arjan Gittenberger from GiMaRIS, a marine research consultancy, has shown otherwise.

According to Gittenberger, comparisons of the genetic makeup of naturally occurring mussels in Dutch waters shows that their nature has not changed in the past 50 years.

“There is only one mussel species present in Dutch waters, *Mytilus edulis*. Populations growing in different areas have different characteristics that can be attributed more to local dynamics and water flow, rather than to cross-breeding with other species,” he said.

Dutch traders hope that his findings will be useful in countering ongoing environmental concerns about the movement of seed into the country.

There are currently 88 licensed mussel cultivators in the Netherlands, selling into 12 processing companies. The majority of companies are located in Yerseke, situated on the Oosterschelde, which is home to the only dedicated mussel auction in the world.

All mussels must pass through the auction, where they are sold by the shipload. Vessels moor alongside the auction key and each lot is sampled, to obtain information on the number of pieces per kilo, average shell size and the weight of the mussel meat. This is flashed onto video screens in the auction room, where buyers may make purchases via computers or mobile phones. The process is swift and business-like.

The price achieved at auction varies considerably, but the average price in 2016 was EUR 860 (USD 905) per MT compared to EUR 1,080 (USD 1,136) per MT in 2015.

Once purchased, companies direct vessels to their re-watering plots in the Oosterschelde, where mussels are placed back on the sea-bed until required for processing. The season is generally from July to April, but the majority of companies now sell year-round.

Belgium is the most important market for Dutch mussels, accounting for 64 percent of sales, with France taking 20 percent, Germany 11 percent and the Netherlands just four percent.

Since 2011, Dutch mussels have carried Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification, which has become a pre-requisite for sale to many European retailers.

Mussel processing is highly mechanized and care is taken to keep them in chilled seawater until the point of packaging. Modified atmosphere packaging (MAP) has become the most popular format in 5-kg and 10-kg trays and vacuum bags, but mussels are also sold in traditional 10- or 15-kg jute bags, which shrink when wet, thereby ensuring the shells remain compressed and tightly closed.

To encourage customer and consumer loyalty, mussel companies produce a variety of point-of-sale material and promotional goods and the traditional start of the season in July is heavily promoted and celebrated.

Despite not being great consumers of mussels, the Dutch are proud of their product, which is actively promoted to visitors by the national tourist board as “black gold.”

The industry operates a comprehensive monitoring programme for naturally occurring toxic algae, with weekly samples of water and shellfish analysed. Issues generally only occur during the warmer months, and when samples show high values of toxins, relevant production areas are closed until new samples show that the area is safe to reopen. This early warning and response system guarantees the safety of produce reaching the mussel trading companies, and ultimately the marketplace.

In 2016, a new toxin, Tetrodotoxin (TTX) was added to the monitoring program and there were fears that mussel sales would be adversely affected, following its discovery in two re-watering plots in the Oosterschelde at the start of the season.

The issue quickly resolved itself, with industry taking measures to avoid using the affected areas, and consumer confidence remaining unaffected. However, the toxic event caused a great deal of consternation amongst traders about the potential for future occurrences and the results of this year’s sampling program will be watched with interest.

