

Starting up

- Did the first weeks of the Coronavirus pandemic lead to panic-buying of products such as toilet rolls in your country? Has it now died down?
- What do you know about the supply chain for a simple product such as dried pasta?

Reading Comprehension

To find out more about the process of how an everyday product such as pasta gets to your plate, read the article and then answer the questions below.

- 1 What kind of non-perishable staples have people been buying in big quantities?
- 2 How much did sales of pasta increase in the UK in March 2020 compared with the year before?
- 3 Where is most of the wheat grown that is used to make pasta for the UK market?
- 4 Where is the pasta produced?
- 5 How is the pasta transported from the manufacturers in Italy to UK supermarkets?
- 6 What is one of the threats to the supply chain for pasta?
- 7 How much wheat do Italian pasta makers import per year?
- 8 How busy are Italian pasta makers at the current time, and how does that compare to normal times?
- 9 What is the demand for pasta compared to normal times?
- 10 Why has there been a 12-15 per cent decline in the pasta producers' workforce?
- 11 What are two threats to the supply chain for pasta being transported from Italy to the UK?
- 12 What proportion of freight from continental Europe to the UK uses ferries?

How coronavirus is affecting pasta's complex supply chain

¹To fill their “pandemic pantries”, consumers have rushed to buy non-perishable staples such as toilet paper, canned goods and pasta — especially pasta. In the UK, for instance, Nielsen figures show pasta sales spiked 168 per cent in the week to March 14 compared with the year before.

²Following the journey of pasta from farm to fork illustrates all the processes that will need to be kept running during the coronavirus outbreak. Like many foodstuffs, pasta relies on a highly complex international supply chain — often passing through several countries on the way to consumers’ plates.

³For pasta eaten in the UK, most is made from wheat shipped from Canada, which is then processed by companies such as Barilla and De Cecco in Italy, which exported \$3bn of pasta last year. After being transported by trucks through Europe, UK wholesale distributors, such as Princes, will then sell it on to supermarkets.

⁴Wheat production itself should be relatively unaffected by the coronavirus. In Canada, grain production and harvesting is largely mechanical.

⁵If port workers in Europe fall sick, however, supplies coming into Italy could be affected; the country imports about half of the 5m-tonnes of durum wheat it uses for pasta each year.

⁶For now, production at Italian factories is running at full capacity compared with the usual 75 per cent, according to Ivano Vacondio, president of Italy’s food and beverage federation, Federalimentare, as producers struggle to meet a doubling in demand. This is despite a 12-15 per cent decline in the factories’ workforce, mainly because of staff’s childcare problems.

⁷“You can imagine the pressure the factories are facing,” said Mr Vacondio, who is also the chairman of a leading Italian flour producer, Molini Industriali. “But things are under control. Factories won’t be closed.”

⁸Even if production can be maintained in Italy, however, analysts warn there may be further disruption ahead if border controls clog motorways, deterring drivers from delivering products. “Food is a priority and things should be moving freely, but no one wants to get caught up in a line of 1,000 trucks,” said Stefan Vogel, analyst at Rabobank.

⁹For the UK, a potential pinch point in the food supply chain is the Channel crossing. With more than half of freight from Europe using ferries, the health of the shipping sector could pose a risk, warned Bob Sanguinetti, chief executive of the UK Chamber of Shipping.

¹⁰“The country needs shipping to keep moving for the supermarkets to function,” he said.



Vocabulary

Find words and phrases in the article which match these definitions.

- 1 phrase to describe food items that can be stored for a long time (para 1)
- 2 basic but essential items (para 1)
- 3 the sudden start of a disease (para 2)
- 4 when a factory is producing the maximum number of products possible (para 6)
- 5 to try hard to do something that is very difficult (para 6)
- 6 an interruption that prevents something from continuing (para 8)
- 7 to block (para 8)
- 8 making people decide not to do something (para 8)
- 9 an area where things could get stuck (para 9)
- 10 create a difficult or dangerous situation (para 9)

Grammar – passive forms

There are a lot of examples of passive forms in the text. Complete these sentences using the passive form of the verb in the appropriate tense.

- 1 A lot of pasta _____ (eat) in the UK.
- 2 Pasta for the UK market _____ (make) in Italy from wheat that _____ (grow) in Canada.
- 3 Canadian wheat _____ (ship) to Italy, where it _____ (process) by Italian pasta makers such as Barilla and De Cecco.
- 4 The finished pasta _____ (export) to markets such as the UK.
- 5 Pasta from Italy _____ (transport) by truck to ferry ports such as Calais.
- 6 From Calais, the pasta _____ (carry) by ship to the UK and then _____ (take) by truck to distribution centres and finally it _____ (deliver) to supermarkets.

Discussion

- 1 Why did people rush out to buy non-perishable goods such as toilet paper and pasta, even though supermarkets insisted that there was no problem of supply?
- 2 A temporary shortage of non-perishable goods is one thing, but it can soon be dealt with by producers increasing production. But a bigger threat, especially in the UK, is that fruit and vegetables grown locally may not get picked due to a shortage of labour, as workers from countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, who usually do these seasonal jobs, cannot travel at the moment.

What could be a solution to this challenge?

ANSWER KEY**Reading comprehension**

- 1 Toilet paper, canned goods and pasta.
- 2 168 per cent.
- 3 In Canada.
- 4 In Italy.
- 5 By truck.
- 6 If port workers in Europe fall sick, supplies of wheat coming into Italy by ship could be disrupted.
- 7 About 2.5m tonnes (half of what it uses each year).
- 8 Their plants are working at full capacity. Normally they run at 75 per cent capacity.
- 9 The demand is double.
- 10 Because of childcare problems due to schools being closed.
- 11 Border controls could block motorways, and any problems with ferries between France and the UK could also cause disruption.
- 12 More than 50 per cent.

Vocabulary

- 1 non-perishable
- 2 staples
- 3 outbreak
- 4 at full capacity
- 5 struggle
- 6 disruption
- 7 clog
- 8 deterring
- 9 pinch point
- 10 pose a risk

Grammar

- 1 is eaten
- 2 is made ... is grown
- 3 is shipped ... is processed
- 4 is exported
- 5 is transported
- 6 is carried ... is taken ... is delivered

Articles sourced from the Financial Times have been referenced with the FT logo. These articles remain the Copyright of the Financial Times Limited and were originally published in 2020. All Rights Reserved. FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd. Pearson ELT is responsible for providing any translation or adaptation of the original articles.

With a worldwide network of highly respected journalists, the Financial Times provides global business news, insightful opinion and expert analysis of business, finance and politics. With over 500 journalists reporting from 50 countries worldwide, our in-depth coverage of international news is objectively reported and analysed from an independent, global perspective.

For more information: <http://membership.ft.com/pearsonoffer/>