

WHITE PAPER | OCTOBER 2026

Winning in India's Food Market

A comprehensive study of India entry for international food companies

What works, and what doesn't.



THE QUESTIONS EVERY COMPANY ASKS

Is India worth it for a premium or differentiated brand?

Where does the brand have a right to win?

Can the landed cost and channel economics work?

What does it take operationally to enter?

What does it take to win in India?

Which partner can be trusted?

What should be done first?

Overview

Executive Summary

Is India ready for my brand, and is my brand ready for India?

Several international food companies have already demonstrated India's potential, building substantial businesses and making India one of their most important global markets.

Five Signals Shaping India's Premium Food Opportunity

1



India is becoming a global growth market

Premium consumption is expanding, urban consumers are more discerning, and international brands are building meaningful businesses, with India becoming one of their largest markets worldwide.

2



New channels are accelerating market access

Quick commerce, modern retail and growing café, QSR and hotel chains are making premium and differentiated products more accessible, enabling international brands to reach customers faster than ever.

3



Differentiation matters more than market size

A large market does not automatically mean an attractive opportunity. Imported products win where they offer something local supply cannot readily match: authenticity, technical performance, consistency, innovation or brand value.

4



Trade economics are improving, but viability is product-specific

Recent GST changes and trade agreements can open opportunities that previously struggled to compete. However, landed costs, channel margins, regulatory compliance and distribution requirements must all work together. The right product at the wrong landed price is still the wrong product.

5



Winning in India requires building a market, not just entering one

Successful entry is about creating a sustainable business. Companies need a focused product range, the right customer channels, capable partners and sustained market-development investment. The strongest strategies establish a viable base, prove demand and then expand across products, cities and channels.

Section 01

Background

Why does India matter now?

India is both obvious and uncomfortable.

Obvious, because its scale is impossible to ignore. A large population, rising incomes and a vast consumption base have made India part of almost every international growth conversation.

Uncomfortable, because the practical questions remain difficult. Is India ready for a premium imported brand? Will the landed cost work? Which products have a genuine right to win? Who can be trusted on the ground? And what should the first move be?

These questions matter more now because India has changed faster than many international companies realise.

Over the last few years, Indian consumers have become more open to premium products, global flavours, better ingredients, convenience, health-led choices and authentic brand stories. The opportunity is no longer limited to low-price mass-market formats. A more discerning consumer segment is emerging, and it is shaping demand across cafés, hotels, restaurants, quick commerce, premium retail and modern foodservice.

The sharper question is whether a premium or differentiated brand can build India into one of its most important global markets. In selected categories, the answer is increasingly yes.

The timing question is category-specific. In markets where importer capability, chef relationships, quick-commerce visibility or premium shelf space are becoming scarce, waiting can raise the cost of entry. In other categories, the better decision may be to delay until regulation, landed economics or channel readiness improves.

This white paper has been prepared by One Consulting Firm to answer seven practical questions:

- Is India worth it for a premium or differentiated brand?
- Where does the brand have a right to win?
- Can the landed cost and channel economics work?
- What does it take operationally to enter?
- What does it take to win in India?
- Which partner can be trusted?
- What should be done first?

The paper looks at India primarily through the import route, which is often the first phase of market entry. Once demand is proven, local manufacturing, co-manufacturing or deeper partnerships can follow to reach wider consumer segments.

Large international food companies such as Nestlé, PepsiCo, Unilever and Mondelez are already well established in India. They compete mainly in mass-market and mainstream categories, where scale, local manufacturing and wide distribution decide the outcome. That space is outside the scope of this paper. The focus here is premium and differentiated brands, which typically start in smaller volumes, often through imports, and build a defined customer segment.

What this means: for many international brands considering India, the question has shifted from whether to enter to how, and in what order.

Section 02 | Question 1

Is India Worth It?

What has changed in the last five years?

Short answer: Yes, for the right categories. Channels, consumers, foodservice and trade economics have all moved in the last five years.

What has changed in the last five years that makes India more attractive for premium and global food brands?

Everyone knows India is large. Household spending is about US\$2.4 trillion. India imports about US\$42 billion of agricultural products a year, of which about US\$8.4 billion is consumer-oriented food (USDA, 2024)¹.

But size is not the story. Speed of change is.

India is increasingly viewed as a strategic growth market by international food companies, with improving consumer readiness and more developed routes to market. India imports about US\$0.9 billion of California almonds every year and is their largest single-country market by volume.

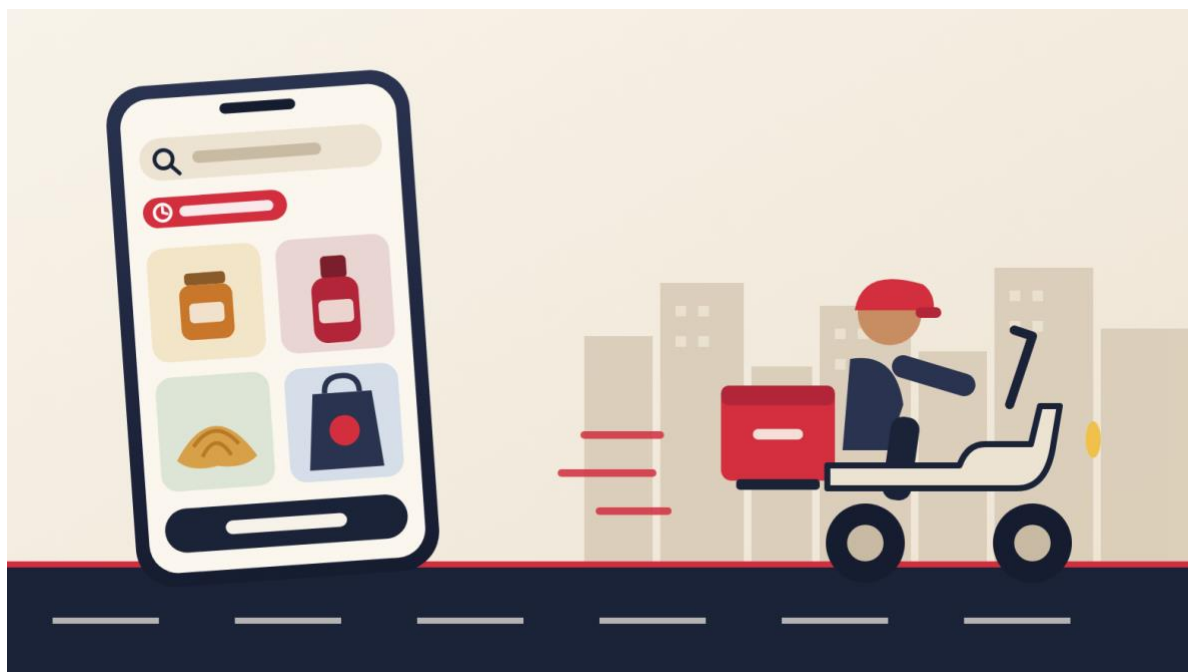
Four changes are driving this shift.

2.1 Quick commerce is opening up access to premium food

Five years ago, a niche imported brand waited for space in a few gourmet stores. Today, quick commerce can put it in front of affluent consumers in major cities, where it can be discovered, ordered and delivered within minutes.

The channel barely existed five years ago. Its gross order value reached about US\$13.6 billion in FY2025 (Redseer Strategy Consulting)² and is projected to grow sharply by 2031. For premium food, it has changed trial, repeat purchase and category discovery. Quick commerce improves consumer access but does not remove the cost of distribution. Brands must assess platform listing economics, product rotation, working capital, inventory exposure and promotional investment before treating the channel as a scalable route to market.

This matters because premium products do not always need national distribution on day one. They need visibility in the right households, in the right cities, through the right channel. Quick commerce has made that possible faster than traditional retail ever could.



Context: premium discovery is shifting from a few shelves to high-frequency digital channels.

2.2 The consumer wants the real thing

Urban Indians are no longer looking only for cheaper copies of global products. They increasingly seek authenticity, better ingredients, clean labels, superior texture and new taste experiences.

A traditionally tea-led country is building a coffee culture.

Premium cafés, Italian pizzerias, Korean noodles, zero-sugar drinks and energy drinks have gained real momentum.

Hell Energy has made India one of its most important markets outside Hungary. Dr. Oetker helped develop the mayonnaise and peanut butter categories in India.

Korean food companies Nongshim and Samyang show how quickly a global taste format can scale when the identity is clear, the positioning is premium and the distribution is right.

Magnolia Bakery, brought to India in 2019 by its franchise partner Spago Foods, now has outlets in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Delhi NCR.

Roughly 130-140 million urban and affluent consumers (Blume Ventures, 2025), mostly in the largest cities, form the broad pool for premium food. Premium food buyers are a smaller subset of this group. That is not all of India, but it is large enough to build meaningful businesses. This is how new consumption trends usually begin: early adopters move first, and the trend then expands as channels, awareness and affordability improve.

2.3 The Indian food industry is already moving

The shift is not visible only in imported brands. Indian incumbents and foodservice players are already adapting to a more health-aware, premium and ingredient-conscious consumer.

- **HUL / Unilever is buying into health and wellness.** HUL took a 51% stake in OZiva in 2022 and, in February 2026, bought the remaining 49% for about US\$87M, valuing the brand at about US\$177M. Health, protein, clean-label and functional nutrition are now strategic growth areas.
- **Protein is becoming mainstream.** Protein is moving beyond gyms into everyday food, snacking, beverages and desserts.
- **QSR chains are reformulating.** McDonald's India has talked about reducing sodium, removing trans fats, using whole-wheat or multi-millet buns, and avoiding artificial colours, flavours, added preservatives and added MSG in selected offerings.
- **Clean-label ingredients are becoming more relevant.** As brands reduce artificial additives, demand rises for natural emulsifiers, fibres, stabilisers, flavour systems and technical ingredients.
- **Desserts are changing too.** Baskin-Robbins India has introduced vegan ice creams, showing that even indulgence categories are responding to health-conscious consumers.

So what: India's own food industry is already changing its formulations, acquisitions and menus. That is a strong signal for international brands offering better ingredients, technical foodservice solutions and premium products.

2.4 The economics are improving

India's entry economics are becoming more workable for international food brands.

The India-EFTA agreement has been in force since October 2025 and the India-UK agreement since July 2026. The India-EU agreement was concluded in January 2026 and is expected to enter into force in 2027, after signature and ratification. The India-New Zealand agreement is due to take effect this year. Over time, these agreements can materially improve landed-cost economics for selected categories, although dairy has been kept out of the EFTA, UK and EU agreements.

As an illustrative scenario, if chilli sauce and mixed condiments under HS 210390 were to move from 30% basic customs duty to 0%, the economics would change sharply. On a €100 CIF import value, today's cash tax at import is about €39.7: 30% basic customs duty, 3% social welfare surcharge and 5% IGST. At the FTA end-state, only 5% IGST remains, taking cash tax at import to about €5.0.

That means total import cash-out falls from about €139.7 to €105.0, a reduction of roughly **25%**. The customs-duty burden itself falls from **33% to 0%**.

These changes do not necessarily make India easy. Regulation, labelling, shelf life, cold chain and partner selection still matter. But they make India more workable for brands that enter with the right product, channel and partner strategy.

Point to consider: the timing looks favourable, so the next question is which products are best placed.

Section 03 | Question 2

Where Is The Right To Win?

In which product groups can an imported brand win, and why?

Short answer: Imported brands win where they solve a problem local supply does not yet solve well enough.

For One Consulting Firm, “right to win” means more than product quality. It means that a brand has a real India opportunity and a practical route to capture it.

OCF tests the opportunity through **seven practical questions.**

A structured way to assess whether your brand is right for India, and how to succeed.



What's Driving **Market Attractiveness?**

3.1 Premium-friendly channels are growing rapidly

India's premium food channels have evolved considerably across both foodservice and consumer retail. The opportunity is strongest where the customer channel is already growing.

Specialty coffee chains, premium cafés, bakery and dessert chains, five-star hotels, pizzerias, modern trade and quick commerce are all expanding. These are the buyers and influencers that create

demand for frozen bakery, patisserie, fruit preparations, dairy, premium snacks and foodservice ingredients.

A frozen croissant does not need the whole of India. It needs premium cafés, hotel breakfast buffets, airline caterers and foodservice distributors that value consistency. A bake-stable fruit filling does not need every bakery. It needs industrial bakeries, premium dessert chains and dairy companies that need repeatable performance.

Exhibit 1: Rapid growth of channels creating demand for premium food imports³

Specialty cafés, bakery chains, hotels and quick commerce are expanding the buyer base for differentiated imports.

Channel	Player	Est.	Outlets	Growth highlight
Specialty coffee	Blue Tokai	2013	240 (July 2026)	FY25 revenue (actual) Rs 325 crore (about US\$34M), up from Rs 41 crore in FY21. Target: 800 cafés by FY30.
Specialty coffee	Third Wave Coffee	2016	240+	Across 27 cities
Specialty coffee	abCoffee	2022	100+ (Aug 2026)	Compact format. Target: 150 stores
Bakery cafés	Theobroma	2004	200+ in 30+ cities	FY24 revenue (actual) US\$42M; FY25 run-rate (estimate) about US\$55-58M. ChrysCapital agreed in July 2025 to buy 90% (deal value about US\$254M)
Pizzerias	Si Nonna's, Mad Doh, Vincenzo Capuano	-	22+ (Si Nonna's)	Neapolitan and sourdough chains are growing. Si Nonna's has 22 outlets in 7 cities since 2022; Vincenzo Capuano has opened in Mumbai
Five-star hotels	Taj (IHCL), ITC Hotels, Oberoi, Marriott, Hyatt, Accor	-	-	F&B share of revenue reported at up to about 40% at some operators
Quick commerce	Blinkit, Zepto, Instamart	-	-	Gross order value about US\$13.6bn in FY2025 (Redseer)

500+	Backed	Rapid	Up to 40%
Premium coffee cafés in three chains	Investor conviction	Aggressive expansion	More buyers, more demand
Three specialty coffee chains already run 500+ cafés between them.	The leading specialty coffee chains have attracted institutional investment.	Leading chains continue to add cafés at pace, a sign that the category is under-penetrated, not saturated.	F&B is a growing share of five-star hotel revenue (up to about 40% at some operators), so demand for premium inputs grows with it.

The buyers of premium food are multiplying, which widens the market for differentiated imports.

Source: OCF analysis; Redseer Strategy Consulting; Entrackr; company filings, statements and press (see notes). Actuals are from filings or company statements; targets and run-rates are labelled.



Context: real Indian cafés and bakeries are the buyers and influencers for frozen bakery, fruit preparations and premium ingredients.

3.2 The economics are becoming more workable

Exhibit 2: How a trade agreements can significantly benefit the landed cost⁴

Illustrative scenario showing the commercial impact of eliminating a 30% basic customs duty. Actual preferential tariff eligibility, phase-in and GST treatment must be verified for each product and country of origin.

Duty element	Today	FTA end-state
Basic customs duty	30%	0%
Social Welfare Surcharge (SWS)	3% (10% of basic duty)	0%
Customs duty burden	33%	0%
IGST*	5%	5%
Cash tax at import on €100 CIF	about €39.7	about €5.0

Source: OCF analysis based on the Indian customs tariff. *IGST shown at 5%, the GST rate on HSN 2103 since 22 September 2025.

Exhibit 2b: FTA relevance by product group⁵

Status October 2026: India-EFTA in force since 1 October 2025, India-UK in force since 15 July 2026, India-EU concluded in January 2026 and not yet in force. Duty cuts and phase-in differ by HS line.

Product group	India-EFTA (in force)	India-UK (in force)	India-EU (concluded, not yet in force)
Frozen bakery / pastry	Selected processed-food lines. Line-specific	Line-specific. Sweet biscuits and chocolates are among lines to fall	Duties of up to 50% on bread and other processed foods to be eliminated
Fruit preparations / fillings	Selected processed-food lines. Line-specific	Line-specific. Some fruit concessions	Processed fruit products and fruit juices reduced or eliminated
Specialty cheese / dairy	Excluded. Dairy is a sensitive item	Excluded. Dairy Chapter 4 kept out	Excluded. Dairy is among the sensitive sectors
Olive oil / tree nuts	No specific cut identified	Edible oils excluded. Nuts not confirmed	Olive oil duty of 45% to fall to 0% over five years. Nuts not confirmed
B2C sauces / condiments	Line-specific. See Exhibit 2 for an example	Soft drinks, chocolates and sweet biscuits to fall. Sauces are line-specific	Processed foods with duties of up to 50% to be eliminated. Sauces are line-specific

Source: OCF analysis of the agreements as reported by the European Commission, Indian and UK press and trade advisers. Where a cell says line-specific, confirm duty by HS code, origin and agreement before commercial commitments.

GST on several relevant categories has reduced. Recent and forthcoming trade agreements create selective opportunities for significant improved import economics. Benefits vary significantly by product classification, origin, tariff phase-in and exclusions, making SKU-level evaluation essential.

3.3 Right to win by product group

We have analysed six high-potential categories from an import standpoint to assess the company's right to win in each. These include B2B categories serving cafés, hotels and restaurants, as well as B2C categories. These are illustrative categories chosen for their import relevance, not a definitive ranking.

Exhibit 3a: Size and main buyers by product group³

Product group	Market size / opportunity indicator	Main buyers and channels	Established international brands, suppliers or origins
1. B2C consumer brands	Large. Examples include Ferrero US\$229M; Hell US\$49-58M	Quick commerce, modern trade, e-commerce, gifting	Ferrero, Hell, Red Bull, Nongshim, Samyang
2. Tree nuts, olive oil and olives	Large. California almonds about US\$0.9bn	Importers, modern trade, e-commerce, gifting	California Almonds, Borges
3. Fruit preparations, dessert bases and bakery ingredients	Medium. A small number of large buyers	Bakery chains, dairy and dessert makers	Puratos, Bakels, Barry Callebaut, Zeelandia
4. Frozen bakery, viennoiserie, patisserie and desserts	Niche but growing. Premium accounts, e.g. 500+ cafés in three premium chains	Cafés, QSR, hotels, cloud kitchens	Bauli, Délifrance
5. Differentiated dairy and cheese	Niche for imports. Cheese market about US\$1.9bn; premium imports a small share	Pizzerias, bakeries, hotels, premium retail	Lactalis (Président), Britannia Bel Foods
6. Exotic and processed produce	Niche. A small set of premium buyers	Hotels, caterers, premium retail	Zespri

Source: OCF analysis; company websites and press. Examples only, not a full list.

Exhibit 3b: Why imports can win, and what to watch

Product group	Why imports can win	What to watch	Practical implication
1. B2C consumer brands	Distinct brand, premium positioning, health and gifting niches	Heavy marketing spend. Label claims and FSSAI veg, non-veg and vegan marks	Demand is proven. Winning needs a distinct product, the right price and sustained spend
2. Tree nuts, olive oil and olives	Origin, grade and health story. Little local supply	US dominates almond supply. Risk of commodity pricing	Large, with open channels. A brand story is needed to escape commodity pricing
3. Fruit preparations, dessert bases and bakery ingredients	Bake-stable performance and consistency at scale	Qualification takes months, longer for large accounts. Few buyers. Additive checks	A technical sale to a few buyers. Slow to start, solid where performance matters
4. Frozen bakery, viennoiserie, patisserie and desserts	Consistent quality where skilled pastry labour is scarce	Cold chain and a frozen-capable importer	A clear case on consistency and labour, provided the cold chain is in place
5. Differentiated dairy and cheese	Technical butter, UHT cream, PDO cheese	Veterinary certificates, rennet rules. Dairy excluded from trade agreements	An opening in technical dairy, but the regulatory check comes first
6. Exotic and processed produce	Items India grows little or not year-round	Cheaper local alternatives. Cold chain cost	Narrow but real white space at modest scale

Group 1 - B2C consumer brands

This is one of the largest opportunities, given the size of consumption and the low penetration. The categories include snacks, chocolates and confectionery, instant noodles and ready meals, sauces and condiments, spreads and breakfast cereals, and beverages such as energy drinks, coffee and juices. Imported consumer brands can win when they bring a clear identity, strong packaging, India-fit pricing and the right channel. Red Bull, Hell Energy, Nongshim and Samyang show that global taste formats can scale when the proposition is sharp. The risk is copycat products or categories where Indian brands already compete strongly on price.

Group 2 - Tree nuts, olive oil and olives

One of the strongest import-led groups. Almonds show how a commodity can become a developed category when origin, quality and consumer education are built over time. Olive oil and olives can also win through health, cuisine and premium positioning. The risk is bulk, price-led supply with no brand, origin story or channel strategy.

Group 3 - Fruit preparations, dessert bases and bakery ingredients

These win through technical performance. The opportunity is in bake-stable fillings, fruit preparations for dairy and ice cream, dessert bases, flavour systems, bakery fats and ingredients that improve consistency. India has common fruit and commodity ingredients, but still has white space in technical solutions for cafés, hotels, industrial bakeries and premium dessert players.

Group 4 - Frozen bakery, viennoiserie, patisserie and desserts

This group wins on consistency, speed and reduced dependence on skilled labour. Frozen laminated pastry, bake-off breads, waffles, macarons, canapés and desserts allow cafés, hotels and caterers to serve consistent products without building full pastry capability in every outlet. The key limitation is the cold chain across the full route, so the first market is metro-led and foodservice-led.

Group 5 - Differentiated dairy and cheese

There is a real opportunity in specialty cheese, cream, butter sheets and mascarpone. Premium hotels, Italian restaurants, cafés, pizzerias and industrial bakeries are the natural customers. Dairy, however, needs careful handling. Compliance, veterinary certificates, rennet and animal-feed declarations are best checked first. Plant-based alternatives follow different rules and are assessed separately.



Context: cafés, hotels and bakeries are the foodservice buyers for frozen bakery and dairy.

Group 6 - Exotic and processed produce

This is niche, but clear. Imported produce works when India does not grow the item reliably or year-round, when the product saves kitchen labour, or when it gives year-round consistency. Berries, certain herbs, artichokes, asparagus and prepared vegetable formats can work for premium hotels, western restaurants and high-end retail. Fresh berries carry no IGST and frozen berries 5%. Generic frozen vegetables are unlikely to justify the landed cost.

For an international brand, define the India problem first. The strongest candidates have an advantage the buyer can see and economics that hold after duties, freight and margins.



Context: modern trade and quick commerce have made B2C discovery easier, but winning still needs a distinct product, India-fit pricing and sustained support.

Section 04 | Question 3

Can I Make It Pay?

Duty, freight and margins: will the price work from port to shelf?

Short answer: Only if the full price walk works from factory to shelf.

A product works in India when the full landed price, from factory to shelf, is justified by the value it creates: better quality, origin, labour saving, lower wastage, longer shelf life, technical performance, health positioning, gifting value or brand strength.

This does not mean every imported product becomes viable. Freight, cold chain, shelf life, minimum order size, distributor margin, retail margin and GST still matter. But lower duties can improve the equation significantly, especially for premium products where demand already exists and price elasticity is not purely mass-market.

In practice, the headline duty rate tells only part of the story. The full price walk, set against the target channel's willingness to pay, shows which products can defend their final price.



Context: the landed-cost answer sits in the details: HS code, documentation, freight, duty, GST and partner margin.

Exhibit 2 in section 3.2 shows how a duty change flows through to cost. Exhibit 4 applies it to a fruit filling, before and after a full FTA.

Exhibit 4: Price walk, imported fruit filling or frozen berries into a metro café or bakery^{3,4,6}

Illustrative only. Assumes €3.00/kg CIF for a fruit filling or frozen berry product. SWS = Social Welfare Surcharge. Final figures depend on HS code, origin, agreement and the duty schedule. Source: OCF analysis; Indian customs tariff; 5% GST on fruit preparations and frozen fruit.

Cost element	Today (pre-FTA), € per kg	After full FTA, € per kg	Notes
CIF price	3.00	3.00	Assumed ex-factory price plus freight and insurance, per kg of fruit filling
Duty + SWS	0.99	0	Assumed basic customs duty 30% plus Social Welfare Surcharge (SWS) 3%, about 33% combined. Confirm by HS code
IGST (integrated GST) at 5%	0.20	0.15	On CIF plus duty. Often recoverable by a registered buyer
Port, handling and cold storage	0.30	0.30	Assumed at 10% of CIF, if needed
Importer and distributor markup	0.90	0.69	About 20% combined markup on cost, not a gross margin
Illustrative purchase price to bakery / café	about 5.39	about 4.14	Sum of the lines above, including IGST
Same, in rupees	about Rs 593	about Rs 455	At Rs 110 = €1
Reduction from the FTA	about €1.25 per kg	about 23% lower	Customs duty and SWS fall away; only IGST remains

Verdict: under the illustrative assumptions, eliminating customs duty would reduce the purchase price, including IGST, by approximately 23% (€1.25/kg, about Rs 138). The net economic benefit depends on the buyer's eligibility for input tax credit.

Should I Wait For The Trade Agreement?

Not necessarily. First test whether the product is commercially viable at today's duty. If it is, entering now builds position. If it only works at post-FTA duty, waiting may be better. Duty reductions usually phase in over time, while market positions are being built now. Early movers can build importer relationships, channel listings, chef or buyer familiarity, and consumer habits before the market becomes more crowded. A later entrant may enjoy a lower duty, but may also have to spend more to win shelf space, visibility and partner attention.

The answer is different for some categories. Not every category benefits from moving first. The practical filter: does the brand solve a problem local supply cannot yet match, and can that advantage be defended after duties, freight and margins?

Exhibit 5: Where waiting is smarter than entering now

Category type	Why waiting can be better	Recommended stance
Highly regulated dairy / animal-origin	Veterinary certificates, rennet rules, dairy excluded from the trade agreements	Screen first. Enter only if the path is clear
Commodity-style products	Landed cost rarely justified. Price pressure is high	Avoid or delay until there is a clear brand or origin story
Thin cold chain outside metros	Quality failure risk in tier-2 and tier-3 cities	Enter metro-first, and only where the full route is proven
Crowded B2C with strong local brands	High marketing spend is required	Enter only with a distinct format or price

Early entry is a choice, not a default. In dairy and commodity categories, waiting often preserves capital and optionality.

When Does Local Manufacturing Pay?

Local manufacturing usually works best after demand is proven, rather than as the starting point. It can improve economics, widen the addressable consumer base and reduce import dependence, but only when the brand has enough volume, channel clarity and confidence in the product-market fit.

For many premium and differentiated brands, imports provide a lower-commitment route to test demand. However, acquisition, contract manufacturing or local production may be preferable where import duties, shelf life, product economics or market access make imports unattractive.

Prove the market first. Choose the operating model that makes commercial sense.

Point to consider: it helps to test the price walk early, as it shapes which products suit the first range.

Section 05 | Question 4

Can I Do It?

Paperwork, cold chain, entity and tax: is India too complicated to enter?

Short answer: India is manageable when entered in sequence. Most brands can start through an importer of record and solve documentation, labelling, landed cost, cold chain and city selection one step at a time.

Five areas need to be settled before launch.

5.1 Product and import paperwork

Food imports require the right importer registration, FSSAI compliance, product documentation, ingredient checks and India-format labels. Animal-origin products, dairy and meat require deeper checks, including veterinary certificates and other product-specific documents. This is best confirmed before sending samples or committing to orders.

Labels carry the FSSAI veg mark (green circle) or non-veg mark (brown triangle); a vegan logo is mandatory from 1 July 2027⁷. Situations differ by product. A fruit preparation acceptable in Europe may contain an additive, colour or preservative level that Indian standards do not permit, which a label change cannot fix. Dairy ingredients may need animal-origin, feed and veterinary documentation. A premium product may be importable but arrive with too little shelf life left to sell. Before committing to the India range, brands should undertake SKU-level regulatory screening covering product classification, permitted ingredients and additives, applicable standards, importer approvals, country-of-origin documentation, labelling and minimum residual shelf-life requirements.

5.2 Cold chain and shelf life

Frozen and chilled products must remain at the required temperature from port to warehouse to customer. Cold-chain infrastructure is available across major metros, but feasibility must be established for the complete distribution route, including customs clearance, storage, minimum delivery quantities, temperature monitoring and last-mile economics. It becomes thinner in smaller cities. The first launch geography works best when it follows the infrastructure, not ambition alone.



Context: execution quality, cold chain and first-city choice decide how far the launch can travel.

5.3 Local entity

Most brands do not need an Indian entity at the start. In the early phase, the importer of record usually handles import, customs, warehousing, invoicing and local distribution. A local entity becomes relevant later if the brand wants direct control, key-account billing, local hiring, manufacturing, franchising or a larger strategic presence.

5.4 Tax and landed-cost structure

Customs duty, GST, freight, insurance, port costs, cold storage, importer margin, distributor margin and retailer margin all affect the final price. The structure is best reviewed product by product, ideally by HS code, with a customs broker and tax advisor before commercial commitments are made.

5.5 Infrastructure and operating city

India is usually better entered city by city than as one national market on day one. The first city is best chosen on the product's channel fit and operating feasibility: port access, cold storage, distributor capability, target accounts and delivery economics. For many premium products, Mumbai, Delhi NCR, Bengaluru and selected metro clusters are the logical first markets.

The task is not to solve all of India before the first order. It is to solve the first product, first channel, first city and first partner.

Practical implication: a gradual approach can be taken, building proof in one place before widening.

Section 06 | Question 5

What Does It Take To Win In India?

What separates the brands that succeed?

Short answer: The brands that win treat India as a market to build, not an order to fulfil. They keep their standards, invest behind the category and adapt the route to market.

THE PLAYBOOK

The winning model: **enter with a focused range, build a scalable business**

The global playbook, applied unchanged, rarely works in India. Winning brands keep their core standards, but adapt the route to market.

1 ESTABLISH A STRONG INITIAL POSITION



Solve a clear customer problem

Focus on categories where your product offers a distinct advantage, such as consistency, labour saving, wastage reduction, menu creation, shelf appeal or gifting.



Bring global quality to India

The product must meet global standards, as premium customers compare with what they have seen in London, Dubai, Singapore and New York.



Choose the right segments

Start with customer segments and channels where you can win, and adapt pack, price or format to Indian tastes, vegetarian preferences, festivals and local needs.

2 EXECUTE THROUGH THE MARKET BUILD



Invest behind the category

Come with long-term intent. A trial order can test logistics, but it does not build a market. Stock, samples, buyer follow-up, trade activation and time are all needed, and immediate scale from one distributor is rare.



Educate the customer

Chefs, bakers, QSR teams, category managers and importers often need to understand how the product works, how to use it and how to sell it.



Work with the right partners

Collaborate with capable importers, distributors and channel partners who can develop the category with you.

3 ADAPT AND SCALE SUSTAINABLY



Execute consistently

Labels, supply, cold chain, lead times and product performance need to be consistent, as trust breaks quickly when they fail.



Adapt to local needs

Taste, price points, vegetarian preferences, festivals and channels differ by city and customer type, so winning brands learn fast and adjust pack, price, channel or product mix where needed.



Build a scalable business

The brands that win do not simply export products. They adapt, invest, educate and stay through the early learning curve to build a sustainable business in India.

SIX LEVERS OF A DURABLE INDIA BUSINESS

**CONSUMER INSIGHT**

Understand Indian tastes, vegetarian preferences, festivals and city-level differences.

**PRODUCT****DIFFERENTIATION**

Global quality, authentic origin and clear customer benefits (consistency, labour saving, wastage reduction, menu creation, shelf appeal or gifting).

**CHANNEL ACCESS**

Modern trade, quick commerce, HoReCa, QSR and other channels with the right route to market.

**TRADE ECONOMICS**

Landed costs, duties and GST, channel margins and pricing that reflect the value delivered.

**TRUSTED PARTNERSHIPS**

Capable, committed importers and distributors with market access and ability to invest for the long term.

**DISCIPLINED EXECUTION**

Focused range, consistent supply and execution, with ongoing customer support and a clear roadmap to scale.



Context: category building requires training, sampling and buyer education, not only shipment.

Section 07 | Questions 6 and 7

Whom Do I Trust, And What Do I Do First?

If I do not know the market, who should I rely on?

Short answer: The first partner can shape the brand's first three years in India. Selection should therefore begin with channel fit and capability, not enthusiasm alone.

What A Good Partner Brings

A credible partner can be assessed on four dimensions: access to the chosen customer channel, operating capability for the product, commercial discipline in explaining the price walk and margins, and willingness to invest in market development.

The partner should be able to translate the brand's proposition into named customers, a realistic launch range, agreed activity and measurable milestones.

Signs to Watch Out

Be careful of partners who:

- ask for exclusivity before proving capability;
- promise national distribution immediately;
- cannot explain the landed-cost build-up;
- have no clear channel focus;
- are unwilling to share customer feedback;
- treat the brand as another catalogue item.

First Steps, In Order

1. **Testing the right to win.**
This confirms whether the product has demand, differentiation, regulatory feasibility, channel fit and a defendable landed cost.
2. **Selecting the first channel.**
The starting point is a channel, not "India": premium cafés, hotels, QSR, quick commerce, modern trade, gourmet retail, industrial bakery or foodservice ingredients.
3. **Building the partner shortlist.**
The shortlist covers partners who already serve the chosen channel and have the capability required for the product.
4. **Running a focused trial.**
The trial uses a defined customer set, a selected SKU range, clear pricing, agreed feedback loops and realistic success measures.

Section 08

Risks And Challenges

What can go wrong?

Short answer: Most India entry risks are known in advance. They can be limited through careful product selection, a disciplined price walk and staged commitments.

India entry carries risks, but most can be managed if they are identified early and built into the launch plan.

Exhibit 6: Key risks and how to limit them

Most risks can be limited through product choice, pricing discipline and staged commitments. Source: OCF analysis.

Risk	What it means	How to limit it
Regulatory change	FSSAI rules, labelling or import conditions may change after entry.	Tracking regulatory updates, checking labels before shipment and working with an importer or advisor who monitors compliance.
Partner underperformance	Samples are sent and meetings happen, but orders do not follow. The partner may lack channel depth or sales discipline.	Clear targets, review dates and reporting. Broad exclusivity is best held back until performance is proven.
Cold-chain failure	Frozen or chilled products may lose quality if temperature is not maintained from port to customer.	Starting in cities with proven cold chain, using partners with frozen or chilled capability and tracking temperature-sensitive shipments.
Price pressure	Imported products may look expensive against local alternatives, especially in mass channels.	Competing where the premium is justified: quality, origin, consistency, labour saving or brand story. Commodity comparisons rarely help.
Slow adoption	Chefs, bakers, buyers or consumers may take time to trust the product.	Sampling, demonstrations, training and repeated follow-up, with realistic timelines.
Wrong channel choice	A good product can fail if launched through the wrong channel or customer segment.	A deliberate choice of first channel (HoReCa, QSR, quick commerce, modern trade, gourmet retail or industrial users), phased rather than everywhere at once.
Poor range selection	The brand may send too many irrelevant SKUs, or too few to make the business meaningful.	A focused India range that meets the right-to-win tests and creates distributor economics.
Supply inconsistency	Stock-outs, long lead times or uncertain supply can break buyer confidence.	Confirmed capacity, MOQ and lead times before launch, with buffer stock where required.
Working capital and inventory exposure	Stock is ordered in advance and held locally before revenue arrives. For slow-moving products, cash tied up in inventory can matter more than nominal margin.	Sensible first shipments, planned lead times, agreed payment terms, stock rotation, shelf-life tracking, and clear responsibility for expired or unsold stock.

Brands that name the risks early are better placed to manage them. The risk is not India itself; the risk is entering India without the right product, partner, channel and operating discipline.

Practical implication: planning early for regulation, cold chain and partner needs can help smooth the launch.

Section 09

How OCF Can Help Your Journey

Can someone help me do this?

Short answer: OCF helps international food brands decide, enter and grow in India, from the first market assessment to a working channel and partner.

One Consulting Firm is a boutique advisory firm focused on India entry strategy, partner selection and growth execution. OCF helps international brands understand whether India is right for them, identify the right categories and channels, find credible partners, and support the early execution journey.

The team has worked with leading companies and brands across foodservice, retail, hospitality and consumer markets, including Starbucks, Coca-Cola, Unilever, Costa Coffee and Mitsubishi Electric, with more than 250 engagements delivered.

OCF supports your brand through the entire India journey, from strategy to execution.

1 Decide where to play

Market attractiveness, consumer segments, category dynamics, regulation, pricing, channel strategy and a right-to-win assessment.

2 Select the right partner

Identifying, evaluating and engaging the right franchise, joint venture, distribution, retail or strategic partners.

3 Launch and build the market

Operating model alignment, launch planning, partner coordination, performance reviews and safeguarding brand integrity.

Why OCF

250+

Engagements

Our partners' combined track record across strategy, partnerships and transformation.

Senior-led expertise

Consulting rigour, industry depth

Senior partners with consulting and on-the-ground industry experience lead every engagement, with the agility of a boutique firm, so you can make faster, better-informed decisions.

Partner access

Strong relationships in India

Established access to leading Indian corporates, franchise operators, importers and distributors, helping you reach the right partners faster.

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Supporting material

Appendix

A. Success stories

These cases show that India can become a scale market for the right international food brand. Common factors are a clear proposition, an appropriate market-entry model, effective distribution and sustained investment.

Hell Energy has made India one of its most important global markets. California almonds turned India into their largest export market through years of category building. Ferrero built a premium chocolate business in India before local manufacturing followed. Dr. Oetker accelerated its India presence through the acquisition of FunFoods, combining an established local brand with international expertise and subsequent manufacturing investment.

Case 1: California Almonds⁸



Result: India is California almonds' largest single-country export market by volume. In the 2025/26 crop year India took 378.5 million pounds, about 19% of California's 2.03 billion pounds of exports, although this was 11% lower than the year before. That is about US\$0.9 billion at the previous year's value per pound (OCF estimate). Shipments have more than doubled since 2016/17, when they were 167 million pounds.

What worked: The Almond Board of California has invested in sustained India demand-building. In 2026, it launched the "Superfood for a Super You" platform and campaign in India.

Lesson: A commodity became a category through origin, consistency and long-term demand creation. Model: origin-led category building.



Case 2: Hell Energy, Hungary^{3,9}

Entered: Hell states it entered India in 2018, with the launch reported in January 2019 at Rs 45 for a 250 ml can.

Result: Hell claims it ranked first in India's aluminium-can energy drink segment by units sold, based on Nielsen May 2023 data. India has also become one of Hell's most important markets outside Hungary. Hell-Energy Private Limited reported revenue of about Rs 462 crore (about US\$49M) in FY2023-24, and market trackers place FY2025 operating revenue at about Rs 500-550 crore (US\$53-58M).

What worked: Hell combined accessible pricing, can format, modern distribution and strong marketing. Its 250 ml can is often sold around US\$0.63 (Rs 60), materially below premium energy-drink benchmarks such as Red Bull.

Lesson: A premium international product can scale in India when the proposition is clear, the price point is accessible and distribution is sharp. Model: import-led, with accessible pricing.



Case 3: Ferrero, Italy^{3,9}

Result: Ferrero India Private Limited recorded sales of about Rs 2,172 crore (about US\$229M) in the financial year ending August 2024, and Ferrero Rocher became strongly associated with premium gifting.

What worked: Ferrero helped build the premium chocolate gifting category in India, then set up its Baramati plant and made India a production hub for Asia and the Middle East.

Lesson: Local manufacturing can follow scale. Import first, prove the market, then localise with care. Model: import first, then local manufacturing.



Case 4: Dr. Oetker, Germany^{3,9}

Result: Dr. Oetker India's turnover grew from about US\$5M in 2009 to about US\$53M (more than Rs 500 crore operating revenue) in the financial year ending March 2024. India's mayonnaise market is estimated at about US\$456M in 2025 by IMARC and US\$522M by Expert Market Research¹⁰, a category Dr. Oetker helped build.

What worked: Dr. Oetker entered India in 2007, bought the local brand FunFoods in 2008 for distribution and manufacturing, helped develop the mayonnaise and peanut butter categories, and in 2016 commissioned a Rs 250 crore (about US\$26M) plant at Kahrani, Rajasthan.

Lesson: Acquisition of an established local brand can accelerate market entry by providing immediate access to manufacturing, distribution and customer relationships. India entry need not always begin with imports. Model: acquisition of a local brand, then local manufacturing.

Counterpoint: not every entry works. Brands tend to stay subscale when they rely on one importer without channel depth, when cold chain breaks down outside the main metros, or when the range is too narrow for distributor economics or too broad for a first partner to push. California almonds demonstrate the importance of sustained category development, while Hell Energy illustrates how accessible pricing, distribution and brand investment can accelerate growth.

B. Notes, sources and assumptions

1. Market data: US Department of Agriculture, Exporter Guide for India (2024). Household spending of about US\$2.4 trillion; agricultural imports of about US\$42 billion; consumer-oriented food imports of about US\$8.4 billion.
2. Quick commerce: gross order value of about US\$13.6 billion in FY2025, from Redseer Strategy Consulting. Gross order value is the value of orders placed, not company revenue, and tracker definitions differ.
3. Exchange rates: Rs 95 = US\$1 is used for rupee-to-dollar conversions in the success stories and in Exhibits 1 and 3a. Rs 110 = €1 is used in the price walk (Exhibit 4). Both are fixed, indicative rates, not live rates.
4. Duties and taxes (Exhibits 2 and 4): basic customs duty of 30% and a Social Welfare Surcharge (SWS) of 10% of that duty, which is 3% of CIF value; IGST (integrated GST) at 5%, the rate on HSN 2103 sauces and on prepared fruit products since 22 September 2025 (56th GST Council recommendations). Illustrative only. Rates and product classification should be confirmed against the current CBIC notification, and the actual duty depends on HS code, origin and agreement.
5. Trade agreements, status at 14 October 2026: India-EFTA in force since 1 October 2025; India-UK in force since 15 July 2026; India-EU concluded in January 2026 and not yet in force; India-New Zealand due to take effect on 20 October 2026. Duty cuts phase in over years and differ by HS line. Dairy is excluded from the EFTA, UK and EU agreements.
6. Price walk (Exhibit 4): assumes CIF of €3.00 per kg, port, handling and cold storage at 10% of CIF, and a combined importer and distributor markup of about 20% on accumulated cost. This is a 20% markup, not a 20% gross margin; a 20% gross margin would require a selling price of cost divided by 0.8. The after-FTA column assumes duty and SWS fall to zero. It is an OCF illustration, not a quotation.
7. FSSAI labelling: Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020 (vegetarian mark: green circle in a green square; non-vegetarian mark: brown triangle in a brown square). The FSSAI vegan logo comes from the 2026 amendment to the Vegan Foods Regulations and becomes mandatory on 1 July 2027.
8. California almonds: Almond Board of California shipment data for the 2025/26 crop year. The US\$0.9 billion value is an OCF estimate at the previous year's value per pound.
9. Company figures: Blue Tokai revenue from Entrackr (company filings); outlet counts and targets from company statements and press, as at the dates shown; Theobroma and ChrysCapital deal from press reports; Hell-Energy Private Limited FY2023-24 revenue and tracker estimates for FY2025; Ferrero India Private Limited sales for the year ending August 2024; Dr. Oetker India from company statements and filings.
10. Mayonnaise market: IMARC Group (about US\$456 million, 2025) and Expert Market Research (about US\$522 million, 2025). Estimates differ by definition and channel coverage.

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