MEKONG TRADE
INTELLIGENCE

VIETNAM FOOD EXPORT PLAYBOOK

The Insider's Guide to Sourcing
Frozen Food from Vietnam

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- Quote comes back in under 2 hours with no questions → They didn't check raw material availability. That price won't hold.
- They only quote CIF, refuse FOB → They may be padding the freight margin. Insist on seeing both.

2.3 Certifications Decoded

HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points)

- The baseline. Every legitimate Vietnamese seafood exporter has this. It's required by Vietnam's NAFIQAD (National Agro-Forestry-Fisheries Quality Assurance Department) for export.
- **What it means:** The factory has documented food safety controls. **What it doesn't mean:** That the controls are actually followed every day. HACCP is necessary but not sufficient.

EU Code (e.g., DL 999, TS 123)

- A number issued by the European Commission after the factory passes an EU audit. Format: two-letter province code + number.
- **This is the gold standard.** EU audits are rigorous and unannounced follow-ups happen. A factory with a current EU code has proven it can meet the strictest food safety standards in the world.
- **How to verify:** Check the EU TRACES database. Codes can be suspended — a certificate on the wall from 2019 doesn't mean they're still approved.
- **Insider tip:** Some factories share EU codes (one factory processes under another's approval). This is technically a violation. If the name on the EU code doesn't match the factory name on the contract, walk away.

BRC (British Retail Consortium)

- Required by most UK supermarkets and increasingly by EU retailers. More demanding than HACCP — covers not just food safety but quality management, site standards, and personnel.
- If you're selling to Tesco, Sainsbury's, Aldi, or Lidl, your supplier needs BRC. No exceptions.
- BRC Grade AA is the top grade. Grade B or C means they passed but with significant non-conformities. Ask for the grade, not just the certificate.

ASC (Aquaculture Stewardship Council) / BAP (Best Aquaculture Practices)

- Sustainability certifications. Increasingly required by US and EU retailers (Walmart, Costco, Whole Foods).
- ASC is farm-level (covers the shrimp farm, not just the factory). BAP covers the full chain from hatchery to processing.
- **4-star BAP** means the entire supply chain is certified. This commands a **$0.20–0.50/kg premium** but opens doors to retailers who won't buy without it.
- **Watch out for:** Factories that claim "ASC certified" but only have chain-of-custody (they can handle ASC product, but their farms aren't certified). Ask specifically: "Are your supplying farms ASC certified, or do you only hold chain-of-custody?"

Halal

- Required for Middle East, Malaysia, Indonesia. Issued by the Halal Certification Agency Vietnam or equivalent.
- Relatively easy to obtain. If a factory doesn't have it but you need it, they can usually get certified within 2–3 months.

Kosher (OU, OK)

- Niche but high-margin. Few Vietnamese factories hold kosher certification, which means less competition if you serve kosher markets.

2.4 The Factory Audit: What to Actually Look For

If you're placing orders over $100K/year with a factory, visit. If you can't visit, hire a third-party auditor. Here's what matters:

Before you arrive:

- Ask for: HACCP plan, EU code certificate, BRC certificate (with grade), last 3 months of lab test results (microbiological), water quality test results, pest control records.
- A factory that hesitates to share these before your visit is hiding something.

On the floor — the 10 things that actually predict quality:

- **Raw material receiving area.** Is it refrigerated? Shrimp sitting in ambient temperature for even 30 minutes starts degrading. Look for ice, temperature logs, and speed of transfer to processing.
- **Worker hygiene.** Hairnets, gloves, no jewelry. Sounds basic. You'd be shocked how many factories fail this. If workers aren't following basic hygiene where you can see them, imagine what happens where you can't.
- **Water quality.** Processing water should be potable. Ask to see the water treatment system and recent test results. Chlorine levels, microbiological counts. Bad water = contaminated product, period.
- **Metal detection.** Every line should have a calibrated metal detector at the end. Ask when it was last calibrated. Ask to see the log. If they can't produce it, assume it's not being done.
- **Freezer temperatures.** Blast freezers should hit **-35°C or below**. Storage freezers must maintain **-18°C or below**. Bring your own calibrated thermometer. Don't trust the wall display — I've seen displays showing -20°C when the actual temperature was -12°C.
- **Glaze control.** For glazed products, excess glaze is the #1 way factories cheat on weight. Spec says 10% glaze? Verify with a glaze test on the floor. Bring a scale.
- **Size grading.** Watch the grading line for 10 minutes. Are undersized shrimp being pulled? Or is everything going into the same box? Poor grading is the most common customer complaint.
- **Packaging area.** Clean? Dry? Are cartons stored off the floor? Moisture-damaged cartons lead to freezer burn and customer rejections.
- **Traceability.** Pick a random finished carton. Ask them to trace it back to the farm pond and harvest date. This should take under 15 minutes. If it takes an hour or they can't do it, their traceability system is fiction.
- **The smell test.** A well-run seafood factory smells like clean seawater and chlorine. If it smells like ammonia or rot, leave. Trust your nose.

After the visit:

- Request corrective actions in writing for any issues found.
- Set a timeline for re-audit if issues were significant.
- **Never** place a large order based on a single visit where everything looked perfect. Perfect on visit day often means they cleaned up for you. The real test is unannounced QC on your first shipment.

2.5 Red Flags: The Supplier Warning Signs

Learn these. They'll save you six figures over your career:

■ **The factory is "too eager."** They agree to every spec, every price, every timeline without pushback. Real factories push back — on price, on lead time, on specs that don't match their equipment. A supplier who says yes to everything hasn't thought about whether they can deliver.

■ **No export history to your market.** "We can ship to the US" is not the same as "we ship 50 containers/year to the US." First-time market entry always has hiccups — labeling, documentation, port procedures. Let someone else be their guinea pig.

■ **They ask for 100% prepayment.** Standard terms are 30% deposit + 70% against B/L copy, or L/C at sight. A factory demanding full prepayment is either in financial trouble or planning to disappear. Either way, don't.

■ **The price is 15%+ below everyone else.** There's no magic in seafood processing. If their price is dramatically lower, they're cutting corners on raw material quality, glaze, grading, or food safety. You'll pay the difference in rejections and customer complaints.

■ **Frequent management changes.** If your contact person changes three times in six months, the factory has internal problems. Your order will get lost in the chaos.

■ **They won't let you visit.** Any excuse — "we're renovating," "it's not a good time," "we'll send photos" — means they don't want you to see something. Legitimate factories welcome buyer visits. It's how they win long-term business.

Bottom Line: Chapter 2

> *Start with VASEP and the EU TRACES list. Send a specific RFQ that asks for the EU code upfront. Verify every certification independently — don't trust wall certificates. Visit the factory or hire an auditor, and focus on the 10 things that actually predict quality (raw material handling, freezer temps, traceability). If a deal looks too good to be true on price, it is.*

About This Playbook

Everything in this guide comes from real deals, real factories, and real mistakes. No theory. If a section doesn't save you money or prevent a disaster, it doesn't belong here.

Prices, duty rates, and regulations reflect conditions as of October 2026. Trade policy moves fast — verify rates and regulatory status before committing to large orders.

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How to Use This Playbook

First-time buyer from Vietnam? Read Chapters 1, 2, and 8 first. Then come back for the rest before you sign anything.

Already importing? Jump to the chapter matching your pain point — QC failures (Ch. 4), logistics costs (Ch. 5), or duty exposure (Ch. 6).

In a hurry? Every chapter ends with a **Bottom Line** box. Read those first.

CHAPTER 1

Why Vietnam: The Opportunity

1.1 The Numbers That Matter

Vietnam is not the cheapest source for frozen food. It is the best **risk-adjusted** source. That distinction is worth understanding before you read another word.

Here's where Vietnam sits in the global frozen food trade:

Shrimp (frozen, all forms)

- Vietnam exports roughly **$3.5–4.0 billion** in shrimp annually, making it the world's **#2 or #3 exporter** depending on the year (ranking #2 or #3 globally in most years, alongside India and Ecuador).
- Key products: black tiger shrimp (*Penaeus monodon*), whiteleg shrimp (*Litopenaeus vannamei*), value-added (breaded, tempura, cooked, peeled).
- Vietnam's edge: **black tiger shrimp**. Nobody does it at scale like the Mekong Delta. If you want premium black tiger — large sizes, U/10 through 16/20 — Vietnam is your first call, not your backup.
- Whiteleg competes directly with India and Ecuador on price. Vietnam is typically **$0.30–0.80/kg more expensive** than India on equivalent whiteleg specs. You pay for consistency, food safety compliance, and shorter lead times to Asian markets.

Pangasius (tra/basa)

- Vietnam produces **over 90% of the world's pangasius**. This is not a competitive market — it's a Vietnamese monopoly.
- Annual exports: **$1.8–2.2 billion**. Main markets: US, EU, China, Brazil, Mexico.
- If you buy pangasius fillets from anywhere, they came from Vietnam. The only question is which processor and what quality tier.

Frozen Vegetables & Fruits

- The quiet growth story. Vietnam's frozen vegetable exports have grown **15–25% annually** for the past five years.
- Key products: edamame, okra, sweet corn, mixed vegetables, taro, lotus root, dragon fruit, mango, lychee, passion fruit.
- Buyers who locked in Vietnamese frozen vegetable suppliers in 2021–2022 are now paying **20–30% less** than buyers who stayed with China or Thailand, with equivalent or better quality.

Coffee (frozen/dried)

- Vietnam is the world's **#1 robusta producer** (~40% of global supply). Not frozen food, but if you're building a Vietnam sourcing program, coffee belongs in the conversation.

- Frozen coffee concentrate and cold brew base are emerging categories with Vietnamese suppliers.

1.2 Vietnam vs. The Competition

Factor	Vietnam	Thailand	India	Ecuador	China
Shrimp price (whiteleg, 31/40 HLSO)	$$$	$$$$	$$	$$	$$$
Shrimp quality consistency	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★
Black tiger availability	★★★★★	★★★	★★	★	★★
Pangasius	★★★★★ (monopoly)	★	—	—	—
Food safety compliance	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★
EU approval (establishments)	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★
US market access	★★★★ (duty risk)	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★ (tariffs)
Lead time to US West Coast	18–22 days	20–25 days	25–30 days	12–15 days	14–18 days
Lead time to EU (Rotterdam)	28–32 days	28–32 days	30–35 days	25–30 days	30–35 days
English proficiency (factory level)	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★
Contract reliability	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★

What this table doesn't tell you: Thailand is the "safe" choice but you'll pay 15–25% more across the board. India is cheap but inconsistent — expect to reject 1 in 8 containers if your QC isn't tight. Ecuador wins on logistics to the US but has limited product range. China has tariff and perception problems in Western markets that aren't going away.

Vietnam is the **balanced choice**. Not the cheapest, not the most premium — the one where your total landed cost (price + QC failures + delays + compliance risk) is lowest.

1.3 The Structural Advantages (Why This Isn't Temporary)

Geography. The Mekong Delta is one of the world's most productive aquaculture regions. Warm water year-round means **2–3 shrimp harvest cycles per year** vs. 1–2 in most competing regions. That translates to fresher raw material and more stable pricing.

Processing infrastructure. Vietnam has **600+ seafood processing establishments**, with over 100 holding EU codes (approval to export to the European Union — the gold standard for food safety

compliance). The top 30 processors can handle any spec a US or EU buyer throws at them.

Trade agreements. Vietnam has FTAs with the EU (EVFTA), UK (UKVFTA), CPTPP members (including Japan, Canada, Mexico, Australia), and South Korea. This means **0% or reduced tariffs** on frozen food into these markets. A US buyer pays MFN rates; an EU buyer often pays zero or near-zero duty under EVFTA (check the specific tariff line — a few products have quotas).

Watch out for: The US-Vietnam trade relationship is the weak link. Anti-dumping duties on shrimp (Chapter 6) and the absence of a bilateral FTA mean US buyers face more friction than EU or Japanese buyers. Factor this into your sourcing strategy.

1.4 The Risks Nobody Talks About

Raw material price volatility. Vietnamese shrimp farm-gate prices can swing **15–20% within a single quarter** based on disease outbreaks, weather, and Chinese buying patterns. Your factory quote is only as stable as their raw material cost. Always ask: "Is this price locked, and for how long?"

Chinese re-export demand. When China buys aggressively (typically Q4, ahead of Lunar New Year), Vietnamese raw material prices spike and factory capacity tightens. If you're negotiating in October–December, expect **5–10% higher prices** and longer lead times.

Currency. The VND/USD rate is managed, not free-floating. It moves slowly but in one direction over time. A 2–3% annual VND depreciation is normal. Factories price this in — don't expect to benefit from it.

Bottom Line: Chapter 1

> *Vietnam is your best risk-adjusted source for frozen shrimp (especially black tiger), pangasius (no alternative), and increasingly frozen vegetables. You'll pay slightly more than India but get fewer headaches. Time your purchases to avoid Q4 Chinese buying surges. If you're selling into the EU or Japan, Vietnam's FTAs are a massive advantage. If you're selling into the US, read Chapter 6 before you do anything else.*

CHAPTER 2

Finding & Vetting Suppliers

2.1 Where to Actually Find Factories

Forget Alibaba for serious volume. Here's where real buyers find Vietnamese processors:

Tier 1: Industry Directories (Start Here)

- **VASEP** (Vietnam Association of Seafood Exporters and Producers) — vasep.com.vn. The member directory is the closest thing to a verified supplier list. If a shrimp or pangasius processor isn't a VASEP member, ask why.
- **EU TRACES list** — The European Commission publishes every Vietnamese establishment approved for EU export, with their EU code numbers. Search "EU TRACES Vietnam establishments." This is public, free, and the single most useful vetting tool you have. If a factory claims EU compliance but isn't on this list, they're lying.
- **US FDA Import Alerts** — Check if a factory has been flagged. Search the FDA's import alert database by company name. A factory on Import Alert 16-81 (shrimp) or 16-136 *(seafood HACCP) is radioactive* — don't touch them until they're cleared.

Tier 2: Trade Shows (Best ROI for New Buyers)

- **VietFish** (Ho Chi Minh City, August) — Vietnam's largest seafood expo. 200+ exhibitors. You can meet 30 factories in two days. Go.
- **THAIFEX** (Bangkok, May/June) — Many Vietnamese processors exhibit here too. Good if you're already sourcing from Thailand.
- **Seafood Expo North America (SENA, formerly the Boston Seafood Show)** (March) — Vietnamese pavilion is always large. Good for US buyers who can't travel to Vietnam yet.

Tier 3: Referrals

- Ask your freight forwarder. Good forwarders in HCMC know which factories ship reliably and which ones are always late.
- Ask your QC inspection company. They see inside factories every week. They know who's clean and who's cutting corners.
- **Do not** rely solely on a trading company's recommendation. They'll steer you to factories that give them the best commission, not the best quality.

Watch out for: "Factories" that are actually trading companies with no production facility. Ask for their EU code number in the first email. A real processor knows it by heart. A trader will dodge the question or send you someone else's certificate.

2.2 The First Email: What to Ask

Don't send a generic RFQ. You'll get a generic (inflated) quote. Send this:

> *Subject: RFQ — [Product] [Spec] — [Your Company] — [Target Volume]*
>
> *Hello,*
>
> *We are [company], a [importer/distributor] based in [country]. We are looking for a supplier for:*
>
> *- Product: [e.g., Frozen raw black tiger shrimp, HLSO]*
>
> *- Size: [e.g., 16/20]*
>
> *- Specification: [e.g., IQF, 1kg retail box, 10x1kg master carton]*
>
> *- Volume: [e.g., 2 FCL/month, 12-month program]*
>
> *- Target delivery: [e.g., CIF Los Angeles]*
>
> *- Certifications required: [e.g., HACCP, EU code, BRC]*
>
> *Please provide:*
>
> *1. Your EU code number (if applicable)*
>
> *2. FOB and CIF pricing for the above spec*
>
> *3. Current lead time for first shipment*
>
> *4. Your main export markets*
>
> *Thank you.*

Why this works: You've signaled you're serious (specific specs, volume commitment, certification requirements). You've asked for the EU code upfront (filters out traders). You've asked about their existing markets (if they already ship to your region, logistics and compliance are proven).

Red flag responses:

- "We can do any spec, any certification" → They're a trader, not a factory.
- No EU code provided, or "we are applying" → They don't have one. "Applying" has meant "never going to get it" in 9 out of 10 cases I've seen.