



ARTICLE

# Strategic Partnerships: An Advantageous Path to European Expansion for Food & Beverage Brands

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## ARTICLE BRIEF

- For U.S. brands seeking cross border growth, Europe remains one of the most attractive expansion opportunities globally. The region combines affluent consumers, sophisticated retail infrastructure, strong demand for healthier food & drink products, and a large addressable market spanning more than 450 million consumers.
- Across functional nutrition, Better-For-You, and health-focused categories, consumer demand continues to shift toward products that deliver convenience, nutrition, and clean labels.
- A strategic partnership can provide a faster, lower-risk path to European growth. Compared to a higher risk standalone entry strategy, a partnership can offer U.S. brands market access, operational capability, and local credibility, helping drive efficient growth and scale.

## WHY EUROPE IS ATTRACTIVE

Europe represents one of the largest consumer markets globally, with more than 450 million consumers, high disposable incomes, and a sophisticated grocery retail ecosystem.

The opportunity is strongest in higher-income European markets, such as UK & Ireland, DACH, Benelux, Switzerland and the Nordics, where grocery spend is high and consumers are more receptive to premium functional products.

While Europe offers significant growth potential, successful market entry is often more complex than many U.S. brands expect. Fragmented consumer preferences, diverse retail structures, strong private label penetration, and varying regulatory requirements can create material barriers to entry.

## EUROPEAN EXPANSION: ROUTES TO SCALING A BRAND

Food & beverage brands typically pursue one of three expansion strategies when entering Europe:

### ① Greenfield Expansion

Greenfield expansion provides maximum control over brand positioning, operations, and long-term strategy. However, it is also the most resource-intensive option, requiring brands to build local teams, distribution infrastructures, retail relationships, and regulatory capabilities from the ground up.

### ② Acquisition

Acquisition provides immediate access to infrastructure, customers and market presence. While this can accelerate growth, it typically requires substantial capital and introduces integration risk across culture, systems and operating models.

- Mars's acquisition of KIND in 2020, which gave Mars greater exposure to Better-For-You snacking while providing KIND access to broader global capabilities.

### ③ Strategic Partnerships

Strategic partnerships offer a middle ground between full control and full ownership. They provide access to local expertise, retail relationships, manufacturing capabilities, and distribution infrastructure without the capital intensity of acquisition or greenfield expansion risks.

- CELSIUS's 2024 partnership with Suntory Beverage & Food demonstrates this approach, using Suntory's established sales and distribution platform to enter the UK, Ireland, and France efficiently.

For U.S. and Global food & beverage brands, strategic partnerships can be the most effective way to overcome the practical barriers of European expansion, providing access to local market knowledge, retailer relationships, distribution infrastructure and regulatory expertise without the cost and risk of building from scratch.

#### FULFIL NUTRITION: A BLUEPRINT FOR PARTNERSHIP-LED GROWTH

Few examples better illustrate the value of strategic partnerships than Fulfil Nutrition (Fulfil):



Founded in Ireland in 2016, Fulfil entered the market with a differentiated proposition: high-protein, low-sugar bars enhanced with vitamins and positioned as an everyday Better-For-You snack rather than a traditional sports nutrition product.



The brand quickly gained traction in Ireland before expanding into the UK, securing listings with major retailers including Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda and WHSmith. Rather than attempting to build international infrastructure independently, Fulfil pursued a partnership-led growth strategy.



In 2019, Hershey acquired a minority stake in the company, providing access to distribution capabilities and market expertise in North America. The partnership allowed Fulfil to enter the U.S. market through a phased approach while leveraging Hershey's existing infrastructure.



Importantly, the company adapted its products for local consumer preferences rather than attempting to standardize its offering globally. The strategy ultimately created significant value.



Ferrero acquired Fulfil's international business in 2022, while Hershey subsequently acquired the North American operations outright.

The journey shows how partnerships can accelerate growth, reduce execution risk, and ultimately create strategic optionality for operators and investors alike.



## WHERE SHOULD BRANDS START?

While Europe offers significant opportunity, a phased market-entry strategy is often more effective than attempting a continent-wide launch. Brand owners should select countries with consumers and retail reach that best mirror the success achieved in their existing local markets, for example:

### Netherlands

The Netherlands represents one of Europe's most attractive entry markets. Dutch consumers exhibit high levels of spending, strong adoption of premium food & beverage products, and growing demand for functional nutrition. The market is served by sophisticated retailers such as Albert Heijn and Jumbo, both of which actively participate in the protein and Better-For-You categories.

Beyond its domestic market, the Netherlands also serves as a strategic logistics hub. Rotterdam remains Europe's largest port and provides efficient access to broader continental markets.

### Switzerland

Although smaller in population, Switzerland offers some of the highest purchasing power levels globally.

Swiss consumers are willing to pay a premium for quality, nutrition and innovation. Retailers such as Migros and Coop stock extensive ranges of functional nutrition products, creating attractive opportunities for premium brands.

For many companies, Switzerland represents an ideal market to validate premium positioning before broader European expansion.



## CHOOSING THE RIGHT PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURE

Once a target market has been identified, the next step is determining which type of partner is best placed to support the brand's objectives, whether that is securing retail access, localizing production, building distribution, or enhancing market credibility.

The optimal partner depends on a brand's objectives and capabilities:

### Branded Companies

Large confectionery, snacking, and convenience food companies have established retail relationships, category expertise, and pan-European distribution networks. These organizations can provide immediate market credibility and accelerate access to key customers.



### Food & Beverage Manufacturers

Manufacturing partners can support localization, regulatory compliance, and supply-chain efficiency while reducing logistics complexity. They can also help brands adapt products to local consumer preferences and retailer requirements.



### Retail Distributors





Specialist distributors often represent the fastest route to market. They provide access to established retail networks, local sales teams, and category expertise without requiring significant infrastructure investment.



## PARTNERSHIP MODELS IN PRACTICE

The appropriate partnership model will depend on the brand's level of commitment, desired control, and operational requirements, with structures ranging from straightforward distribution agreements to deeper strategic partnerships or joint ventures.

Partnerships can take multiple forms:

-  **Distribution agreement** - appropriate where rapid market entry is the primary goal.
-  **Manufacturing and distribution partnership** - attractive when localization and supply-chain efficiency are critical.
-  **Strategic commercial partnership** - can provide broader collaboration without requiring equity ownership.
-  **Joint venture (JV)** - for brands seeking deeper alignment, a JV can create shared incentives while combining complementary capabilities. Increasingly, successful expansions utilize hybrid models that evolve over time as the partnership matures and market traction develops.

## SCALING FOOD & BEVERAGE BRANDS: EXAMPLES OF PARTNERSHIP-LED EXPANSION

Several well-known consumer brands have successfully leveraged partnerships to accelerate European growth:

<b>Ghost × Prometheus International / NASKORSPORTS</b>	2024	Ghost accelerated its European expansion through strategic distribution partnerships rather than building local operations. By leveraging established distributors and retail partners, the brand expanded availability of its energy drinks and supplements while preserving its brand identity and avoiding the cost of standalone infrastructure.
<b>CELSIUS × Suntory Beverage &amp; Food</b>	2024 – Present	CELSIUS appointed Suntory as its exclusive sales and distribution partner across the UK, Ireland, and France. The partnership gives CELSIUS access to established retail relationships, route-to-market infrastructure and local market expertise, supporting rapid European expansion.
<b>Vital Proteins × Nestlé Health Science</b>	2020 – 2022	Nestlé Health Science acquired a majority stake in Vital Proteins in 2020 to support the brand's global expansion. The partnership provided access to Nestlé's international distribution, R&D, manufacturing and commercial capabilities, before Nestlé completed the full acquisition in 2022.
<b>Reese's / Hershey's × Euro Food Brands</b>	2017 – Present	Euro Food Brands acts as the exclusive UK distribution partner for Reese's and select Hershey's products. The partnership supports sales, marketing, category management and retail distribution across UK grocery and convenience channels.
<b>KIND × Mars</b>	2017 – 2020	Mars acquired a minority stake in KIND North America in 2017 as part of a strategic partnership to accelerate international growth. KIND gained access to Mars' global infrastructure and route-to-market capabilities while retaining operational independence, before Mars acquired the business outright in 2020.
<b>Froneri × Nestlé / R&amp;R / PAI Partners</b>	2016	Froneri was formed as a joint venture combining Nestlé's ice cream brands with R&R's manufacturing and distribution platform. The transaction created a scaled international ice cream platform with branded and private-label products across more than 20 countries.



## A ROADMAP FOR EUROPEAN EXPANSION

For brands assessing European expansion, success is typically driven by a disciplined, phased approach rather than a broad market launch from day one. By first prioritizing the right markets, then identifying partners with relevant local capabilities, brands can validate demand, refine their proposition, and scale with greater confidence.

Successful expansion typically follows three phases:

### Phase I: Strategy and Market Prioritization

Identify priority markets, target channels, product adaptations, and preferred partnership structures.

### Phase II: Partner Identification and Engagement

Develop a targeted list of prospective partners, conduct outreach, and assess strategic alignment.

### Phase III: Structuring and Execution

Negotiate commercial arrangements, establish governance structures, and execute a phased launch plan. This approach reduces risk while allowing brands to refine their strategy based on market feedback.

Identifying the right partner and structuring the right commercial or strategic arrangement is often where execution becomes most complex. A strategic advisor can play an important role in this process, helping brands assess the market landscape, identify and approach credible partners, manage discussions, and support negotiation of a structure that aligns with the brand's long-term growth objectives.



## CONCLUSION

Europe remains one of the most attractive international growth opportunities for food & beverage brands operating across protein, functional nutrition, and Better-For-You categories.

Success requires more than simply exporting a successful U.S. model. The fragmented nature of European retail, consumer behavior, and regulation creates complexity that can be difficult to navigate alone.

For many brands, strategic partnerships offer an advantageous route to market. By combining local expertise, established infrastructure, and market access with a lower-risk operating model, partnerships can accelerate growth while preserving capital and reducing execution risk. As seen with brands such as Fulfil, the right partner can do more than facilitate market entry, they can become a catalyst for long-term global scale.

For brands considering this route, working with an experienced strategic advisor can help convert European growth ambition into an executable partnership strategy. By supporting market prioritization, partner identification, outreach and transaction execution, the right advisor can help brands navigate the process with greater confidence and improve the likelihood of a successful expansion.

## PRACTICE TEAM



**Robert Adams**  
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Robert is a leading Corporate Finance Advisor with a wealth of experience in Debt Fundraising and M&A. He is a Fellow of Chartered Accountants Ireland. He has developed a strong reputation for financing and refinancing business and property based portfolios, working across a broad range of Corporate Finance activities. He has significant commercial experience in undertaking M&A, Business Reviews, Due Diligences and Strategic Advisory for Corporate clients. Robert has developed a large client base across a broad range of sectors throughout Ireland.



**Rick Thomas**  
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Rick Thomas, FOCUS' CEO, has 25 years of consulting, management and M&A advisory experience across industries including manufacturing, distribution, and food service. Prior to joining FOCUS, he served as Vice President at VSI, a boutique investment banking firm located in Washington, DC. He led M&A activities for publicly and privately held companies in the middle market, several of which have annual revenues in excess of \$1 billion.



**Brian Barrett**  
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Brian Barrett, a FOCUS Managing Director, has extensive expertise in providing strategic advice to entrepreneurs, business owners and companies to assist them in achieving their strategic ambitions and preparing for significant value events. He has over 16 years of corporate finance experience working with SME's, large corporates and semi state bodies across Ireland. Brian has successfully project management and complete many significant transactions across multiple sectors, including retail, technology, food & beverage, agriculture, logistics, banking, energy and leisure.



**Barry Calogero**  
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Barry Calogero, a FOCUS Managing Director, brings more than 30 years of executive management and consulting experience, with an emphasis on driving operational excellence and improving the enterprise value of companies around the world. He has deep expertise across industries including food & beverage manufacturing and distribution. Previous to FOCUS, he was COO of Coastal Sunbelt Produce, where he was responsible for operations, supply chain management, street sales, and asset velocity of the private equity-backed, \$300 million company.



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Kate Elliott is the Director of Research and oversees the production of research, financial modeling and analysis, and writing assignments that are integral to FOCUS' process-driven methodology for executing M&A transaction work.



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Beth Johnson, a FOCUS associate, supports sell-side engagements and works with clients throughout all stages of the transaction process, from valuation and marketing to due diligence and deal execution. Prior to FOCUS, she led capital raise events at 4P Foods, a fresh and specialty foods distributor. Her experience includes working with founder-owned businesses in the natural/organic segment as well as high-growth agtech ventures, with an emphasis on regenerative agriculture.