

by Christopher R. Daubert

# Building Community Through Engagement

**IT'S HUMAN NATURE** to gravitate toward people who share our interests, values, and goals—a tendency that begins at a very young age and continues through our formative years.

I see this firsthand around the University of Missouri campus all the time. Throughout their college careers, students form friendships with people based on their major, living situation, or activities. These common experiences create strong connections as they spend time together, support one another, and celebrate shared achievements. As we transition into adulthood, this behavior extends into our professional lives. We seek out colleagues who share our work ethic or career path, forming workplace relationships that foster collaboration, teamwork, and mutual respect.

These connections and shared interests are the very essence of community.

IFT engages a community of nearly three million people worldwide. Our members live and work in more than 90 countries, across more than 3,000 companies, and at more than 500 colleges and universities. That's a vast network of individuals, all dedicated to advancing the food sciences and feeding the world.

IFT is a safe harbor where every member of our community can safely visit while pursuing their mission. While the benefits of building relationships within a global food system community are remarkable, sometimes proximity matters. That's where IFT sections make a huge impact.

Based in regions across the United States and in four countries, IFT's 47 sections provide a critical in-person point of contact throughout the year.

They work to promote the exchange of knowledge, foster professional development, and support innovation in food science and technology within local and regional contexts.

In 2023, IFT's sections collectively hosted more than 226 events, reaching an audience of nearly 25,000 people. They also granted more than \$250,000 in scholarships and awards to students pursuing careers in food science. Our sections play an integral role in carrying out IFT's mission to connect global food system communities.

There's something uniquely valuable about connecting with people who work in your field and are physically nearby. But don't take my word for it—here's why two of our IFT members prioritize participating in their local section.

Kaavya Rathnakumar first discovered the benefits of volunteering with her local section during her graduate studies at South Dakota State University, and found it so valuable that she continued to engage as her career took her to different parts of the United States.

"I was involved with the Minnesota Section while in grad school and volunteered with the Wisconsin Section when I moved to do my postdoc at the University of Wisconsin-Madison," Kaavya shared. "These experiences enabled me to develop leadership skills, improve communication, and help my peers familiarize themselves with IFT."


Currently a senior scientist at Balchem Corporation in Missouri, Kaavya is now a member of the St. Louis Section of IFT, where she serves as board secretary. "IFT created a path for me to navigate my career from

academia to industry, and it continues to play a major role in advancing my career. The leadership opportunities and connections provided by IFT sections and other aspects of the organization have been instrumental in my professional development."

For Erin Evers, a technical sales manager at SPI Group, participation in the Northern California Section of IFT directly relates to her job responsibilities. "I work for a regional ingredient supplier, so it was really important for me to connect locally with other food scientists in the area. My volunteer work with the Northern California Section of IFT allows me to do that."

But that's only part of the reason Erin is inspired to stay involved. "Transitioning from student life to the working world can be overwhelming. That's why I make it a priority to connect with recent food science graduates who are new to the community and have worked to develop the new professionals community within Northern California, so that young food scientists—those within the first 10 years of their career—have a place to connect, ask questions, and learn from each other."

With more than 450 elected and appointed volunteer section leaders, Kaavya and Erin are two among many who have benefited from the abundant opportunities IFT's sections offer.

I'd love to hear about your positive IFT section experiences. Send me a note at [president@ift.org](mailto:president@ift.org) or give your favorite section a shout-out on LinkedIn or X (formerly Twitter) with #IFTSection. 

**Our sections play an integral role in carrying out IFT's mission to connect global food system communities.**

**Christopher R. Daubert**, PhD, is IFT President, 2024–2025 ([president@ift.org](mailto:president@ift.org)).