

by Michele Perchonok

A More Welcoming and Inclusive Community

Mark Twain once proclaimed that "New Orleans food is as delicious as the less criminal forms of sin." That paints quite a picture. Many others have written on the unique and rich food culture of New Orleans and I admit that it's one of many reasons I'm excited to be in New Orleans for IFT19. New Orleans is going to become even more delicious this month as thousands of the world's leading food professionals fill the city with flavors, ideas, and conversations that will advance food innovation around the globe.

IFT19 is special for me in a number of ways. New Orleans was the location of my first IFT annual event while I was a student at Cornell. At that very first event, I never imagined I might one day come back to New Orleans to preside over an IFT annual event as its President. It makes me wonder as I scan the vast New Orleans Morial Convention Center, observing the many students embarking on their careers with a visit to IFT19. Which of them might one day lead our organization and how different will it look when they do?

Another of my more memorable IFT annual events was also in New Orleans in 2005, just weeks before Hurricane Katrina changed the face of this historic city. Less than six weeks later, I was living in Houston watching the terrible catastrophe unfold on television. It wasn't long before the impact of Katrina hit

closer to home. Houston was one of the larger cities within driving distance and became a place of refuge for as many as 250,000 of the displaced Louisiana residents. When my husband and I volunteered at the local convention center, the best support we could offer to the displaced was to listen to the stories and share in their grief.

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Houston became a permanent home to thousands of families affected by Katrina who decided not to return or migrate elsewhere. This created a challenge for Houston as the influx stretched the capacity of the city's schools, institutions, and infrastructure. Houston faced a dilemma. Would we, as a community, embrace these newcomers and seize the opportunity to welcome them into our community? Or would we discourage them and close ourselves off from the possibility that they might bring new ideas and vigor to a city that welcomed them.

Though not easy, Houston residents knew it was important to make space and welcome these new neighbors and embrace them as part of our community. We grew and progressed, and we were a better city for it. We were better for having them. These new Houstonians brought new ideas

and talents.

When I reflect on that time of change in Houston, I often relate it to IFT. Although it hasn't been the result of a catastrophe, IFT is a community that is changing as well. When I think back to my first IFT and compare it to this year, the changing nature of our profession is evident. For instance, we celebrate that there

are many more women, as women now make up more than half of our profession and growing. For the first time ever, the current IFT President, Immediate Past-President and President-Elect are all women!

Our community is more international, more diverse in the educational paths that brought them to the profession, there is more racial and ethnic diversity, and we have many LGBTQ+ members of our community as well. We are a community with differently abled members, and a community with a spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds and faiths.

Our community is expanding and stretching to be more inclusive of more professionals from more disciplines across the global food system, working in supply chain, sales & marketing, human resources, procurement, and other areas.

Like Houston did, IFT is

adapting to this change, and it will be a better institution for having done so. IFT is working to grow and progress, to create platforms for connecting professionals, breaking down barriers and finding common ground around a common mission and a unifying vision: a world where science and innovation are universally accepted as essential to

a safe, nutritious, and sustainable food supply for everyone.

IFT19 is a wonderful place to experience the changing face of our profession. Look around and connect. Attend sessions at the IFTNEXT stage. See the latest innovations from bright entrepreneurial minds in Start-up Alley and the Food Disruption Challenge featured session. Hear how differences provide us the opportunity to approach and solve problems in new ways from the incredible Dr. Temple Grandin. Browse the hundreds of booths that line the Food Expo walkways. Attend networking events. Catch up with old friends, but more importantly make new ones and welcome them to our community.

Welcome to IFT19. **FT**



Michele Perchonok, PhD, CFS
• IFT President, 2018-2019
• michele.perchonok@gmail.com