WHAT'S NEW IN FOOD SCIENCE

WINTER 2025/26 ISSUE

Virginia Cooperative Extension
Virginia Tech, Virginia State University

Upcoming Trainings & Events

FOOD SAFETY SCHOOL

February 18, 2026
10:00am to 5:00pm
Chesapeake Central Library-298 Cedar Rd, Chesapeake, VA 23322)
Register here

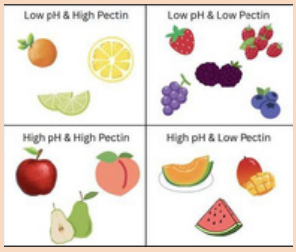
FERMENTATION INDUSTRY MEET & GREET

Tuesday, February 17, 2026
3:00pm–5:00pm – Industry Fair & Table Presentations
5:00pm–7:00pm – Social & Networking Reception
VT Campus -Human & Agricultural Biosciences Building 1 (HABB1)
1230 Washington St SW
Blacksburg, VA 24061
Register here

PRODUCE SAFETY ALLIANCE GROWER TRAINING COURSE

April 28 - April 29, 2026
1:00pm-5:00pm
Online
Register here

New Resources



FRUIT JAM SAFETY EXPLAINED

Check out this resource for information on why fruit jams are considered safe, shelf-stable foods with right balance of fruit, sugar, acid, and pectin. View the publication here.

FOOD STORAGE GUIDELINES FOR CONSUMERS

Check out this resource for guidance on how to store food safely at home. It explains what date labels really mean, how to keep foods at the right temperatures, and more.

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A Look Back at 2025

As 2025 came to a close, we are grateful for the growth and momentum within FST Extension. In 2025 we welcomed several new colleagues: Demi Perry, Mengyi Dong, and Taozhu Sun joined as Extension Specialists, and Stephanie Slocum came on board as a staff member. Their expertise and energy have already begun to enrich our programs and outreach.
We also launched a strategic planning process to guide our priorities and growth in the years ahead. Through this effort, we aim to define clear goals, strengthen our initiatives, and ensure we continue to meet the evolving needs of our stakeholders. Together, these milestones mark a year of renewal and forward-looking vision for FST Extension.

Spotlight on Faculty and Staff Contributions in 2025:

- **Mengyi Dong** contributed to national outreach by staffing the Turkey Talk with All the Sides to Dish virtual food safety hotline on November 24, hosted by the Partnership for Food Safety Education and University of Maryland Extension. The event drew 104 registrants and addressed consumer questions on meat, poultry, and seafood safety.

- **Mengyi** also participated in Hampton School STEM Day, hosting an educational booth on seafood diversity and food safety. More than 50 sixth-grade students and their science teachers visited her booth to learn and engage.

- **Renee Boyer** was recently named the Assistant Dean of Graduate Research Programs for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech.

- **Demi Perry** spent her first few months fermenting any and all grapes she could get her hands on, specifically a handful of varieties that are being trialed in Virginia from grape breeding programs but have yet to be vinified! Once the hectic harvest settled, she turned her focus to acquiring instrumentation for

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Contributors: Alexis Hamilton, Dave Kuhn, Lester Schonberger, Laura Strawn, Taozhu Sun, Melissa Wright, Demi Perry, Stephanie Slocum, and Mengyi Dong

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- **Demi Continued...**her lab space and networking with stakeholders to understand the greatest challenges facing the Virginia wine industry.

- **Laura Strawn** is grateful for her promotion to Full Professor at Virginia Tech after 11 years. There is no evidence of her and her team slowing down any time soon.

Laura is pictured 5th (from left to right)

- **Alexis Hamilton** offered 20 applied food safety workshops this year on regulatory compliance and business development (e.g., Better Process Control School, Current Good Manufacturing Practice, Food Safety School, and others) and published 8 new fact sheets on topics like food labeling, explaining outbreaks, and using needs assessment data to secure additional resources for extension programs.

- Additionally, **Alexis** and her team presented research and extension learnings or practices at 19 events across the U.S., including the annual Women in Agriculture Gathering, Southeast Regional Fruit and Vegetable Conference, and the International Association for Food Protection meeting.

- **Lester Schonberger** supported food safety education efforts by providing training to Extension agents, Master Food Volunteers, Extension Master Gardeners, students, and directly to the public in 2025. He did this through statewide programs, multi-county volunteer trainings, national conference presentations, and media availabilities. For example, Lester was a plenary panelist at the 2026 Consumer Food Safety Education Conference in Houston,

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- **Lester continued...** TX and a symposium presenter at the International Association for Food Protection's Annual Meeting in Cleveland, OH. Lester, along with Eric Bowen (Amherst, ANR), co-hosted a display in the Horticulture Tent at the State Fair of Virginia focused on safe home food preservation.

- **Taozhu Sun** conducted 4 Seafood HACCP trainings, delivered through a combination of in-person and virtual formats, supporting regulatory compliance and food safety capacity building within the seafood industry.

- Additionally, **Taozhu** co-authored an Extension publication focused on seafood nutrition and participated in multiple outreach and engagement activities to promote seafood safety and workforce development, including STEM Day at VSAREC and the Virginia Agricultural Expo, where food safety principles and career pathways in seafood and aquaculture were shared with students, producers, and the broader public.

- **Melissa Wright** participated in more than 30 media interviews (live, via Zoom, print and radio) on topics such as FDA's ban on Red 3 coloring in foods, FDA's planned removal of some other color additives by 2026 as well as summer and Thanksgiving food safety tips. She co-authored 4 new Extension publications.

- Additionally, **Melissa** presented at several summits and conferences including the Virginia Farmer's Market Association (VAFMA) Food Safety Summit, Association of Food and Drug Officials of the Southern States (AFDOSS) Conference, and in FST's Food Product Development and Introduction to Food & Beverage Fermentation courses.

Melissa Wright and Alexis Hamilton at AFDOSS

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- **David Kuhn** successfully helped co-organize a conference and trade show that brought together over 250 participants from around the world to learn about the latest advances in recirculating aquaculture. He also partnered up with VT Engage and co-led a non-credit group of VT undergraduate students to the Dominican Republic on a service learning trip where they worked in several k-12 schools educating kids about healthy eating, how to use computer technologies, and constructed several sanitation stations at elementary schools.

- **Stephanie Slocum** recently coauthored a peer-reviewed article examining the role of peer mentoring in strengthening workforce practices related to occupational health and safety. In late October, she and her colleagues presented their findings at the Mentoring Institute hosted by The University of New Mexico.

As we reflect on the accomplishments highlighted in this year's Spotlight, it is clear that the strength of FST Extension lies in the dedication, creativity, and collaboration of our team. Each contribution—whether advancing research, expanding outreach, or supporting our partners—demonstrates a shared commitment to excellence and service.

Looking ahead, we are energized by the opportunities before us. With our new colleagues, renewed strategic focus, and a growing network of collaborators, FST Extension is well positioned to deepen its impact across the Commonwealth and beyond. Thank you for being part of our community and for supporting our mission throughout the past year. We look forward to building on this momentum in 2026.

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