

Potluck highlights international flavor of VIMS graduate students

By Erin Kelly

(January 21, 2013) Columbian rice pudding, Korean beef bulgolgi, and southern fried okra are not dishes you typically find at your everyday potluck, but when paired with other unique dishes from around the world, you get a buffet à la VIMS.

Faculty, staff, and students from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science took a trip around the globe last week at the Institute's 2nd Annual International Potluck Dinner. The event—held in Watermen's Hall on the VIMS campus in Gloucester Point—showcased the international flavor of the graduate students in William and Mary's School of Marine Science at VIMS. It also provided the international students with a taste of some good ol' Southern cooking.

VIMS' Dean and Director John Wells served as Master of Ceremonies and was joined by W&M's Vice Provost for International Affairs and Director of the Reves Center for International Studies, Stephen E. Hanson. "VIMS has been a world leader in forging vibrant international networks of students and scholars interested in marine studies," says Hanson. "The potluck is a wonderful celebration of the contributions of our students from around the world."

The dinner is sponsored by VIMS' Office of Academic Studies with a goal of recognizing the contributions that international students, faculty, and staff bring to the institute. Jennifer Hay, VIMS' registrar and assistant to the associate dean in the office of academic studies, says, "The potluck is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the start of a new semester with excellent food and interesting conversation."

In an effort to have a little bit of everything, members of the VIMS community are encouraged to bring their favorite internationally inspired main dish, side dish, or dessert to the potluck. "Everything I tried was simply delicious," says Hanson. "This is the first time I've ever had tofu, spaetzle, fried okra, and chocolate crepes at the same dinner!"

VIMS Ph.D. student Zhengui Wang joined forces with visiting researcher Fei Ye to conjure up a fried-beef mixture and potatoes tossed with red peppers—a typical dinner for the pair in their native Jilin province of China. Other dishes featured at the dinner were Japchae (Korean dish made with sweet potato noodles stir fried in sesame oil), and käse spätzle (German egg dumplings with cheese).



Full House: Upwards of 40 dishes filled 2 buffet tables in Waterman's Hall on the VIMS campus and offered something for everyone. Photo by Erin Kelly

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"The International Potluck Dinner is a great opportunity to celebrate the cultural diversity we have among the students, faculty, and staff at VIMS," says graduate student and Vice President of the Graduate Student Association Matthew Freedman. "I was so happy to see how many students were in attendance and the food was delicious!"

Freedman, along with VIMS professor and Associate Dean of Academic Studies Linda Schaffner, put together a slideshow that was displayed in McHugh auditorium for the duration of the event. While attendees dined on the international cuisine, they were able to view pictures, learn traditions, and become familiar with the common delicacies of their fellow classmates.

Graduate students come to Gloucester Point from all over the world, including Brazil, China, Malaysia, Portugal, Taiwan, and Thailand. "Our international students bring a unique perspective to campus which helps to create a more diverse learning environment for everyone," says Hay. "Their international connections create new opportunities to enhance educational partnerships."

Ph.D. student Tony Nalovic came to VIMS in 2011 from the city of Cayenne, the capitol of French Guiana, a small country on the northeast coast of South America. As an international student himself, Nalovic admits he enjoyed sampling from all of the flavors at the potluck. "I really think it's fun to try new things, especially at an event where you can try platefuls of new things," he laughs. "I really liked the German dumplings, the Greek salad, and the French olive and ham bread."

Currently the international student liaison at VIMS, Nalovic says "It's the diversity of the student body that allows VIMS to contribute to research not only here in Virginia, but worldwide." While some might wonder why students from such far distances come all the way to Virginia to pursue their graduate education, Nalovic says "I chose VIMS because I wanted the opportunity to participate in an innovative fellowship program aimed at developing collaborative research between scientist and fisherman."

VIMS' international students constitute 15-20% of the student body. Current international students are Lisa Ailloud (dual citizenship), Solomon Chak, Jiabi Du, Jennifer Elliot, Zhou Liu, Tony Nalovic (dual citizenship), Sikai Peng, Qubin Qin, Adela Roa-Varon, Cielomar Rodriguez, Xiaoteng Shen, Itchika Sivaipram, Amy Then, Jincheng Wang, Zhengui Wang, Chia-Yu Wu, Yongjin Xiao, and Xiaoyu Xu.

Freedman says he would like to see more international events like the potluck dinner at VIMS. The Florida native says hosting events marking the major holidays of the international student's home countries would be a good way to further celebrate the cultural diversity of the graduate program and its students.



International Options: Faculty, staff, and students all brought a dish unique to their hometown or country to the potluck. Dishes ranged from sushi, to crepes, to chocolate chip cookies. Photo by Erin Kelly