

PROTEINS OF THE FUTURE CHALLENGE 2026

Protein Division Sponsored Student Competition

Organized by IFT's Protein Division, the objective of this competition is to bring students closer to the advances and challenges of protein innovation.

By participating in this competition, students will:

- Work on ideas to solve real-life global food problems
- Enhance their knowledge in food proteins (Functionality, environmental impact, extraction methods, nutritional value, etc.)
- Apply previously acquired knowledge
- Improve teamwork skills
- Improve presentation skills
- Gain exposure and prestige

Eligibility & Teams

- All participants must be IFT student members
- Teams of 3-5 students
- Teams may be undergraduate students, graduate students, or both together
- With or without a mentor (e.g., professor, industry expert, etc.)
- Students from different (or the same) universities around the globe can collaborate

Topics

Students will select one of the five topics listed below. The students will then choose a specific protein/product example for the essay.

- **Topic 1: Environmental impact:** Consumers are shifting protein consumption from traditional proteins to alternative proteins, therefore alternative proteins are being used more and more to develop new foods made from more suitable sources. What is the environmental impact of that shift (including increased production)? Calculate/estimate the environmental impact of a specific product or product category made with an alternative protein(s) replacing a specific product or product category made with a traditional protein(s).
- **Topic 2: Scale up:** Many alternative proteins show promising potential to replace traditional proteins in lab research. To use them as food ingredients, they will need to be extracted and commercialized in much larger volumes. How can lab-based protein extraction scale up to industrial capacities? Use a specific alternative protein and directly compare to current extraction methods of a traditional protein.
- **Topic 3: Functionality:** Reaching certain textures or other sensorial attributes (like flavor) using alternative proteins is a challenge when developing new foods. Use a specific alternative protein(s) to demonstrate how it could achieve similar functions (e.g., physiochemical functionalities or sensorial attributes) as a specific traditional protein in the same food product or product category.
- **Topic 4: Nutritional value:** Proteins vary in amino acid compositions as well as their digestibility and bioavailability. Propose a food product made with alternative proteins and show how it compares to a similar product made with traditional proteins in terms of amino acid composition, digestibility, and bioavailability.

- **Topic 5: Commercial / market research.** Commercializing food products made with alternative proteins to the right markets is a challenge. Choose a specific product or product category to show how products made with alternative proteins can impact current and/or future market demands compared to their equivalent or a similar product or product category made with traditional proteins.

Guidelines

- Write an idea created exclusively for the IFT Proteins of the Future Challenge. Only clear and well-organized ideas that cover all the requested fields will be judged. The essay has a max 1,500 words limit, excluding references.
- Submit all student and team information via entry form
- Submit your title, issue addressed, current state of the issue, proposed solution. There is a 1,500-word limit to these sections altogether.
- List your references (APA, not counted in the word limit) and attach any illustrations
- Essays will not only be judged by the scientific approach, but also on creativity, innovation, ability to address the challenge, feasibility, implementation, and clarity of the ideas. Specifically:
 - Under 'Topic to be addressed' (Environmental impact, scale-up, functionality, ornutritional value, commercial/market research)
 - Why an innovation is necessary in this topic
 - Under 'Current state of an issue within the selected topic'
 - Define the specific example/problem to be addressed (Traditional protein and/or food product and/or food category)
 - The relevancy of the problem to be addressed will be judged as well as the clarity of its explanation.
 - Scientific background
 - Impact of the current traditional protein/product (Market, environmental, nutritional, etc.)
 - Under 'Proposed solution'
 - Propose a solution, include any market data that support the solution
 - Consider the entire food chain (from farm to fork)
 - Feasibility of the idea (Briefly describe how it relates with the other four topics in this challenge)
 - Specify the originality of the idea, is this a new idea or refinement of an existing idea? (Both are evaluated equally if they are clearly defined)
 - Scientific background
 - Possible ways of implementation
 - Potential added value of the idea
 - Targeted customer/consumers

- Definitions:
 - **Traditional protein:** Food proteins that have been extensively consumed globally in the last decades/centuries. Examples include but are not limited to animal proteins (meat, egg, dairy proteins, etc.) and cereal proteins.
 - **Alternative protein:** Food proteins with low consumption or with consumption increase in the last decade. Examples include but are not limited to plants, pulses, vegetables, insects, algae, etc. (Be creative).
 - **Food product:** Select a specific food product as you would find it in the supermarket, however, do not include specific brands. Examples include but not limited to: Rice crispies, milk (2% fat), mozzarella cheese, cereal bars, chocolate chip cookies, etc.
 - **Food product category:** Select a specific food product category as you would find them in the supermarket, however, do not include specific brands. Examples include but not limited to: Breakfast cereals, burger patties, milk, cheese, bakery products, etc.

Deadline: April 30, 2026, 11:59 p.m. CT

Awards

Competition participants will be notified of their status prior to IFT FIRST: Annual Event & Expo. Monetary prizes of \$1000, \$750, and \$500 will be awarded and split evenly amongst the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place winners, respectively. There will be additional recognition through Protein Division communications.

Judges

A panel of experts in food proteins including academic and industry experts from the IFT Protein Division and international protein experts will judge the entries.

Judging Criteria

The submission will be evaluated based on 5 aspects: relevancy of the addressed problem, scientific merit of the proposed solution, innovation of the proposed solution, practical application of the proposed solution, and quality of the submission.