Brittney Sly earned her B.S. in human nutrition from CSU and her M.P.H. in global health and health disparities from the Colorado School of Public Health. Currently, she is a doctoral student in Food Science and Human Nutrition at CSU.

Sly has always had a passion for food - eating food, cooking food, studying food and educating others about food. “The factors that influence diet are numerous and complex,” Sly says. “It is never just about the food, but rather the multitude of experiences, perspectives, and abilities each person possesses. All those factors influence what people eat and how much.”

In Bureru, the majority of the population practice subsistence agriculture. Irish potatoes, maize, and beans are the most grown crops and also make up most of local Rwandans daily diets. The lack of food diversity plus a high level of poverty lead to an alarming rate of malnutrition. Sly, with support from a Colorado-based non-profit organization, saw kitchen gardens as a potential solution. She is helping women in Bureru to develop small subsistence plots that could bring more balanced meals to the local households.

Only four months into the project, Sly was excited to find that the impacts had already gone beyond the individual participants. “Several participants mentioned that they were asked by their neighbors to help create additional gardens,” Sly said. “And these requests for knowledge seem to really increase the women’s sense of empowerment.”

Sly returned to Rwanda in September for more data collection focused on the changing dietary pattern and increasing food security.

By Sylvia Bao
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NEW FACULTY

CHARLENE VAN BUITEN

Charlene Van Buiten is an assistant professor in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at Colorado State University. Her research interests are in plant-based nutrition.

Van Buiten is interested in the biochemical functionality of plant-based foods in treating chronic inflammatory diseases of the gastrointestinal tract, and exploring how processing can be used to enhance their health benefits. She became interested in food science as a high school student participating in her local Future Farmers of America chapter, then went on to earn her Bachelor of Science in nutritional sciences at the University of Connecticut.

Van Buiten fell in love with food chemistry research while working on a project related to meat color at University of Connecticut, but then turned her attention to plant foods soon after. While completing her doctoral studies at Penn State, she developed a nutraceutical approach for treating celiac disease using compounds found in tea and other plant-based foods. She then continued to pursue her interest in health-promoting plant compounds during a postdoctoral fellowship in botanical medicine at Rutgers University before coming to CSU.

“Food science is an interesting field to teach because a good food scientist is really a jack of all trades, applying concepts from different fields—chemistry, microbiology, engineering—to solve problems related to food,” Van Buiten said. “In the real world, this often takes some creativity as well. With rapid advancement in technology and an increasingly globalized food supply, students need to be ready to excel in jobs that might not even exist yet. I believe that it’s my responsibility not only to help transfer knowledge to students, but to provide opportunities to apply this knowledge through activities such as developing and testing food products, writing and presenting research proposals, or creatively troubleshooting existing issues in food processing.”

By J. Elizabeth Bennett

MEGAN MUELLER

Megan Mueller is an assistant professor in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at Colorado State University. Her research interests are in obesity prevention in children and families.

Mueller’s research focuses on obesity prevention in children and families, with an emphasis on restaurants and the food environment. She is especially interested in identifying strategies that encourage restaurants to offer healthier options and that enable families to eat healthier when dining out at restaurants. Mueller decided to focus on the restaurant setting because restaurant meals contribute substantially to excess calorie intake, a third of adults and children eat out at fast food restaurants daily, and approximately half of the U.S. food dollar is spent on food outside of the home. The restaurant industry is also a major driver of the food system, so what is served in restaurants can impact the natural environment as well. “It’s a really rich and interesting research area to focus on,” Mueller said.

“My goal in the classroom is to create an environment where students actively engage in course material and take ownership over their own learning,” she said. “A central theme in my coursework will be to enable students to further develop agency in their learning through activities such as student-led class discussions, group projects, data analysis exercises, and self-assessments that allow the student to reflect on their own progress in the course. Integral to this theme is an acknowledgement that both students and instructors bring a wealth of experiences, knowledge, and diverse perspectives. Creating an environment where both students and the instructor have a space to share that information will only further enhance the collective understanding of a subject.”

By J. Elizabeth Bennett

Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition