October and November are packed with holidays and celebrations. This year all of CABM got to experience and learn about many new cultures and traditions thanks to the CABM diversity culture sub-committee and November’s tea time organizers (the Michael Manhart Lab). Polish-American Heritage Month was celebrated first with mountains of pierogis at CABM’s inaugural pierogi party. The Latin-American holiday Dia De Los Muertos was then celebrated at the CABM tea time with Mexican snacks and colorful calaveras (decorated skulls). Finally the Hindu festival of lights, Diwali, was celebrated, again at CABM’s weekly tea time, with Indian sweets and sparklers. The people that put together all these events are compassionate, dedicated, and inspired. We want to thank them all in this newsletter. Keep reading as we introduce our CDC culture sub-committee and our other fellow CABM members.
**Meet the People Behind the Magic**

CABM Diversity Committee (CDC) and the Manhart Lab organized a Diwali celebration on November 9th in Aaron’s Atrium and the CABM/Waksman courtyard. The attendees learned about the celebration, lit sparklers, and enjoyed delicious treats like jalebi, samosas, and kachori! The word ‘Diwali’ derives from Sanskrit and means “a row of lights.” A special thank you to Ashima Chopra, Duhita Sant, Iman Biswas, Battaje Rachana Rao, Ruchi Yadav, and Natalie Losada for organizing the event!

Mary Lally is a 3rd year PhD candidate studying the effects of antibiotics on both the microbiome and the host in the Martin Blaser Lab. What inspires her as chair of the CDC culture sub-committee is the desire to create a space where everyone feels welcomed and respected. She wants CABM to be a place where people learn about diverse experiences and traditions in addition to their work. “Such an environment allows for people to be themselves and comfortable at work and for productivity to increase.” Mary’s favorite holiday to learn about was Diwali. “Lighting sparklers in the courtyard, eating delicious Indian treats, and reading the informational poster board helped me learn more about lighting diyas and the celebration in general.”

Mary Lally, MS
CDC Culture Sub-Committee Chair

Ashima Chopra, PhD
CDC Culture Sub-Committee Member and Tea Time Specialist

Ashima Chopra is a postdoc with Eddy Arnold, working on structure-based discovery of antivirals against viruses like HIV-1, SARS CoV-2, and Dengue virus. Ashima loves exchanging knowledge of cultures. “It is enjoyable (and important) to learn how other cultures and ethnic groups conduct their events, trying new foods, and participating in customs. I want to give back to these events as much as I get out of them.” Of all the cultural events that Ashima has helped organize, her favorite and most memorable have been the Hispanic Heritage Month coffee hours. “I have learned a lot about Hispanic contributions to all walks of society.”
Rachana Battaje is a postdoc in the Manhart Lab studying the variations in bacterial response to antibiotics under stress. Being Indian, Rachana loves exchanging cultural practices with the diverse community at CABM. She says celebrating festivals from different parts of the world is the easiest way to learn. “These festivals open up the mind and the soul, while the body gets to eat yummy food.” Before organizing the tea time, Rachana’s only Dia de Los Muertos education was from watching ‘Coco’! “Organizing a tea time themed for Dia de Los Muertos was when I truly learned about the day of honoring the dead and traditions it involved.”

Barbara Gruszka is a PhD student studying neuronal activity and plasticity underlying motor behavior using multi-photon holographic optogenetics in the Ian Oldenburg Lab. She is inspired by CABM’s diverse faculty, staff, and students and by the individuals that are actively advocating for underrepresented communities. “Creating opportunities for inclusivity and cultural learning enhances our sense of community, belonging, and awareness.” Barbara enjoyed celebrating India’s Independence Day and learning the history behind this important day.

Polish American Heritage Month was previously celebrated in August. The celebration was changed to October to commemorate the first Polish settlers in Jamestown, VA, who arrived in October of 1608, as well as the death of Casimir Pulaski, the father of American cavalry.