

Meet the apprentice butter sculptor preserving State Fair tradition during the pandemic

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State Fair butter pro Linda Christensen invited Kulzer into the butter booth during his second year of study, in 2019.

Courtesy Gerard Kulzer

According to the American Butter Institute, the origins of butter can be traced back to 10,000 years ago, when humans first began domesticating animals. Appearing more than 5,000 years before jewelry made of gold, butter might just be civilization's first and most enduring hallmark of decadence.



The latest proof comes from the 2020 Minnesota State Fair. Yes, we know it's been canceled for just the sixth time in its storied history. Still, at least one unlikely tradition will endure despite so many upheavals surrounding it: sculpting 90-pound blocks of butter to resemble 10 young women from dairy farms statewide, one of whom will be crowned the 67th annual Princess Kay of the Milky Way.

Midwest Dairy, the multi-state organization that chooses each year's princess, will rely on local sculptor Gerard ("Gerry") Kulzer to deliver on this touchstone of "normalcy." The pandemic is preventing legendary butter sculptor Linda Christensen from making her annual pilgrimage from California to whittle 'bergs of butter into princess busts before fairgoers' eyes. Instead, she'll be "virtually participating," guiding Kulzer from afar as her apprentice steps up during this moment of need.

When not imbuing butter with lifelike depths, Kulzer lives in Litchfield and divides his time between teaching, working as a freelance sculptor and presenting live workshops, and parenting his five children (who say he's famous, and have asked "if they can tell their friends" about the State Fair butter gig). His commissioned bronzework has been installed throughout the world, including a tribute to fallen park rangers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"I got my art degree, and then I went back for an industrial tech degree so I could teach shop and art classes," he said, explaining how art and teaching overlap. "I just think I learned so much from showing kids how to do [art]—breaking things down step by step and showing them."



Kulzer pictured hard at work in his studio.

Courtesy Gerard Kulzer

Then three years ago, Theresa Reys at Midwest Dairy invited Kulzer to audition to be Christensen's eventual replacement as the fair's reigning butter sculptor. "She said, 'Come on down the day before the fair, we'll give you a block of butter, you can carve it, and [we'll] see how you are.' They put me in a refrigerator with this 90-pound block of butter and some photos of a person." When he emerged, Kulzer had a decent semblance of a Midwest Dairy employee (who periodically popped into the fridge for a few minutes to sit for her portrait) and a newfound appreciation for what Christensen has done for nearly 50 years.

"It was enlightening, because you don't realize what Linda goes through. She is sitting in that freezing cold butter booth—it is 34 to 40 degrees." It also rotates very slowly, giving gawkers a 360-degree view of the spectacle.

Midwest Dairy liked enough of what they saw—in product and spirit—to invite Kulzer back the next year. During phase two of his apprenticeship, the artists worked in that fishbowl together, tag-teaming a portrait. But this time, they split that butter face right down the middle, as spectators pressed their noses to the glass.

In the butter booth, Kulzer says Christensen showed him "how she attacks these things, how she works. I would do [one] side of the sculpture. So she did the left eye, and then I'd do the right eye and outside of the mouth." The results *could* have been nothing short of grotesque, but somehow their joint effort looked like a coherent sculpture. "It didn't look like one person did one side and another did another side."

Of course, the idea wasn't for Kulzer to step into Christensen's giant shoes just yet. But knowing that his mentor will be available for virtual guidance makes these 12 days in August seem a little less daunting. "It will be very helpful to have her there, kind of watching what's going on, and talking with the Princess, and talking with me.... But it's not the same—you know even this past year trying to teach online distance learning—it's not the same when you can't just reach over and touch the clay or touch, in this case, the butter," says

the teacher. "Um, a picture is worth a thousand words, and actions are worth a million."

After working in so many artistic mediums, Kulzer has found that clay translates most closely to butter, but not precisely. Kulzer sticks to clay-cutting tools for the job, but uses a designated set for butter, to keep things sanitary ("because people want to eat the butter"). Butter also has a subtle grain to it—like wood "and ice cream"—so it might cut smoothly on one side, only to shard badly on the other. This takes some getting used to, and he wants to do his best.

"It's not just the sculpting, but as an ambassador for Midwest Dairy, I feel like I've got to do my best to make them shine, because we're representing all the farmers in the whole state of Minnesota," says Kulzner, of the pressure he's putting on himself. "I'm not just a sculptor for the State Fair event; I'm representing Midwest Dairy and all the farmers out there. I'm showing the fruits of their labor, their hard work."

In preparation for the unexpected coming to fruition this year, Kulzer did say he's been doing a little practicing in the offseason, including accepting some commissioned work in butter. One job involved a former Princess Kay of the Milky Way, whom Christensen had sculpted; her highness had been keeping her royal likeness in the freezer ever since.

"Maybe [for] five years?" guesses Kulzer.

"She told Linda she was gonna have her sculpt her future husband when she gets married someday. And, uh, so that day came," says Kulzer. "Linda just passed that on to me." Though the bride was happy with the result, Kulzer (ever his worst critic) was mortified. "I see the pictures from her wedding, and her husband's head is gigantic."

Only by doing does one realize that a short hairstyle means carving away much less butter in equal sized blocks, thereby leaving a bigger canvas for the face. A teacher to his core, Kulzer says aspiring butter artists need only remember: "Practice, practice, practice. No matter what the physical skill,

you need to practice. You'll get better and better."

Consider this an invitation to grab the nearest hunk of butter and get to work, turning it into something more beautiful than it already is. We've been doing it for eons... just each in our own, unique ways.



Courtesy Gerard Kulzer