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Finally, Some Good News (Carved From 90 Pounds of Butter)

The state fair is canceled because of the pandemic, but the tradition of sculpting a Minnesota dairy princess out of a block of Grade A salted butter will continue, with a few modifications.

By **Michael Levenson**

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Fear not, Minnesotans.

When so much in the world looks bleak, at least you can turn to this bit of good news: The decades-long tradition of sculpting a state dairy princess out of a 90-pound block of Grade A salted butter will continue, with a few modifications.

The sculpting of the 67th Princess Kay of the Milky Way will be livestreamed from a refrigerated butter booth on the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, the Midwest dairy industry said this week, even though the fair itself has been canceled because of the coronavirus.

A bust of the princess will be carved on Aug. 13, one day after judges crown her from a field of 10 finalists, based on her knowledge of the dairy industry, communication skills and general enthusiasm for all things dairy.



Linda Christensen sculpted a butter bust of Rebekka Paskewitz, that year's Princess Kay of the Milky Way, at the 2018 Minnesota State Fair. Matthew Hintz for The New York Times

Buttery heads of each of the nine finalists will be sculpted on the next nine days, according to Midwest Dairy, the group that sponsors the event.

Fans from Minnesota and beyond will be able to watch the action three times a day on the Princess Kay Facebook page and ask questions of the princess and the finalists, who will sit patiently — for six to eight hours — as their likenesses are carved in cold butter.

The news came as a salve to devotees of the delicate craft who were crushed by the cancellation of the fair, a Minnesota tradition since 1859.

“I think any time you can see a butter princess sculpted out of butter is a good day,” said Karal Ann Marling, the author of “Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair.”

Ms. Marling said she had always been mesmerized by the skill required to turn a block of butter into a realistic bust in front of a crowd of curious onlookers.

“The hard part of it for me is you won’t be able to eat any of the tailings that come off when you’re sculpting,” Ms. Marling said. “That was always my favorite part.”

“And the fact that these girls were absolutely darling, and they take it very seriously and they’ll tell you anything about the dairy industry,” she added. “It’s a big part of what’s wonderful about the State Fair.”

The Minnesota dairy industry has been naming a princess since 1954, and her head has been sculpted out of butter since 1965, when the tradition began as a way to highlight the state’s position as a top butter producer.

For the last 48 years, one woman, Linda Christensen, has made the butter sculptures, becoming something of a State Fair celebrity. But Ms. Christensen,

who lives in California, will not be able to travel to Minnesota to sculpt this year because of the pandemic, she said.

She plans instead to join the event from her webcam at home while her apprentice, Gerry Kulzer, an artist and teacher from Litchfield, Minn., takes up the tools of the trade.

“It was just a streak of luck that he’ll be able to pick up the butter knife this year; he is an excellent sculptor,” said Ms. Christensen, who acknowledged she was sad she would not be able to resume her work.

“It’s such a central part of my year,” she said. “I plan for it. I look forward to it. It kind of makes up part of who I am, and it’s a loss not to be able to go.”

Mr. Kulzer, who typically sculpts with water-based clay fired in a kiln, has been working with Ms. Christensen for the past two years to learn the fine art of carving butter in a refrigerated booth cooled to 38 degrees.

Initially, the plan called for Mr. Kulzer to carve only three or four busts this year. Instead, he will have to do all 10 by himself, effectively forcing him to step in for a butter-sculpting master.

“It’s a little scary,” Mr. Kulzer said. “I’m going to be doing everything, and I was looking forward to picking up more tricks, and studying her methods of working and having her as a partner to rely on and lean on.”

Mr. Kulzer said he was concerned about his fingers freezing in such a cold working environment, but was relieved that the event would be streamed online, rather than held in person.

“I don’t have to think of the thousands and thousands of people watching me every day,” he said.

Theresa Reps, the agricultural affairs manager for Midwest Dairy, said organizers were still working out the details to maintain social distance between Mr. Kulzer and his subjects.

The refrigerated booth measures 8 feet across, so they could stay 6 feet apart while inside, she said. But organizers may have the princess and the finalists sit outside the booth to make sure the event is as safe as possible, she said.

“It’s obviously a mixture of emotions,” said Ms. Reps, who had her own head carved out of butter as a dairy princess finalist in 2011.

“There’s sadness for what we’re used to, but also excitement,” she said. “We’re exploring new opportunities and new ways and we’re happy we get to continue this rich tradition, even though it’s not the same.”

One other longstanding tradition will survive this year. The princess and her royal court will get to keep their heads and decide how to use them. In the past, some have chopped them and served them to family and friends. Some donated them to food pantries.

“I do know of someone who has an almost 50-year-old butter head still in their freezer,” Ms. Reps said.