

# Litchfield artist churns out butter sculptures for Princess Kay contestants

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ST. PAUL — It's not quite like a hot knife through butter when a Litchfield artist creates his newest set of sculptures.

Size is one thing, but his medium is harder than clay.

There's a reason for that, professional sculptor and teacher Gerry Kulzer said.

"It's refrigerated butter."



Kulzer spoke to the Times by phone Thursday before making his daily trip to the dairy barn at the Minnesota State Fair. That's where he worked all week to carve

noses, lips and curls out of 2-foot by 18-inch blocks of butter. Each year, the winner and finalists of Midwest Dairy's Princess Kay of the Milky Way contest famously have their likenesses carved in butter.

This year, Kulzer took over for long-time butter sculptor Linda Christensen, who has done the sculpting at the Minnesota State Fair for 48 years.

Kulzer was selected to be her successor and trained under her eye for a portion of the 2019 Great Minnesota Get-Together.



The tools Kulzer uses for this year's 10 butter sculptures are the same he'd use for clay, with one notable exception. At Christensen's recommendation, he brings a large butcher knife with him. It's indispensable in "blocking it out" — carving a block of butter to create the general shape of a human head.

"I grabbed one of our big butcher knives from home and said (to my wife), 'Karen, I'm commandeering this,'" Kulzer said. "... She was nice enough to give me the best knife we have."

He said it takes him about three hours to create the general head shape, and he's hoping for a hint of the eyes and some of the hair before the noon lunch break.



He sits to carve, based on the setup in the butter booth — the refrigerated, see-through enclosure Kulzer carves in — and butter flakes hit him in the chest and land in his lap, he said.

By the end of the day, he's covered in butter.

Another tip from Linda means he dresses in a raincoat and rain pants, which he can hose off at the end of the day.

"The butter melts away, and it's all good," Kulzer said.



## From farm to carving table

Kulzer grew up in Sauk Centre on a family grain farm. His uncle had a dairy farm down the road. Their family didn't buy milk or butter.

"We went to my uncle's farm and got milk from him," he said.

They would let the whole milk sit for a day, skim the cream off the top and use it to make butter.

Kulzer said he has enjoyed spending time in the fair's butter booth, swapping stories with the Princess Kay court about growing up on farms.



"We have great conversations, and it's so fun to relate the stories of me growing up on the farm and compare it to how they grew up on the farm," he said. "So many similarities."

It's not his first time doing live carving demonstrations. Kulzer has done several public demonstrations at art events and in schools.

"It's just so fun to interact with the public," Kulzer said. "... Sculpting isn't something that you see very often in real life. ... To see it in real life is quite something.

"But maybe I'm biased," he joked.

Kulzer started working with clay in college and gravitated toward sculpture. He had a pottery internship, which taught him that aspect of clay wasn't for him.



"I didn't want to make pots the rest of my life," he said. "So I kept teaching and dabbled with sculpture more and more."

Kulzer will teach photography and computer graphics at Sauk Rapids Rice High School this year, he said.

## **Buttering them up: Making this year's sculptures**

In the butter booth, a see-through screen separates Kulzer from the day's muse. Both Kulzer and the Princess Kay finalist posing wear face masks while they sit in the chilled air. When the door to the booth is opened, it fogs up his glasses and the screen.



"The time that the princess is in the booth, they have to be masked up so all that I'm seeing is their eyes, the eyebrows and their hair," Kulzer said.

Sculpting them with masks would go faster, but would their likeness would be lost.

"It would be an interesting way to do it and a great memory for them, but they get a better memory having their likeness sculpted as good as I can the way it is," Kulzer said.

So Kulzer can work on parts of the face obscured by a mask, the finalist steps out of the butter booth to remove their mask. The subject sits on a ladder and stool setup and Kulzer works through the glare on the glass.



## Not the first year he planned

This year was supposed to be another collaborative year between Christensen and Kulzer as he continued to learn from the master.

"That would have been great, because then I can see how she works these things in different ways, because each girl is original," Kulzer said. "And how do you approach curly hair versus straight hair and ... this kind of a nose versus that kind of a nose?"





On Facebook, he's admired pictures of her work from previous years.

"It's really fascinating to see how Linda handled some of the hair of the '80s," Kulzer said.

He is hoping to reach that level of detail in a few years. He said his clay work has more personality, but it's also created under less time pressure. Right now, he's still learning butter.

"I definitely want to make them my style, and that's not gonna happen until I get better at it," Kulzer said. "... I will get there eventually."

He said Christensen has been very gracious and positive about his work when she checked in on him by video.

It's a lot of pressure — not just because of Christensen's legacy, but also because the butter carvings are such a time-honored Minnesota tradition.



"I want to be a good representative for Midwest Dairy and all the farmers that contribute to Midwest Dairy," he said. "You want to do your best. I really want to do my best."

Kulzer said Christensen will return next year to sculpt Princess Kay of the Milky Way, and then "hand me the butter knife."

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