

VARIETY

Minnesota State Fair's longtime butter sculptor gets ready to pass the knife

Longtime sculptor puts State Fair butter heads in the hands of her apprentice.

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Above, longtime butter sculptor Linda Christensen communicated via video call with her apprentice, Gerry Kulzer, who was working on the bust of the 2020 Princess Kay of the Milky Way, Brenna Connelly of Byron, Minn.

For 48 years in a row, [Linda Christensen spent each August at the Minnesota State Fair's butter booth, carving the heads of the state's dairy princesses out of 90-pound blocks of butter.](#)

During that time, the butter heads evolved from foodstuff to cultural icon, much like Minnesota-made Spam. The golden-yellow princesses are equal parts nostalgic and wacky. They represent beauty, smarts and grit.

Christensen attributes the sculptures' allure to a combination of factors: the astounding amount of butter that's used; the material's pretty, almost translucent glow; the live sculpting, in a cooler, in the middle of August; and the connection so many visitors feel to the state's agrarian heritage.

"It's the total package," Christensen said. "Let me just say that if I was standing in a booth sculpting clay, no one would care."

This year, the pandemic prohibited the 78-year-old California artist from visiting her former home state, so Christensen's apprentice, Gerry Kulzer, sculpted in her stead.

Even though the fair was canceled, Kulzer took up Christensen's traditional position in the rotating refrigerated case, shaping a creamy forehead and shoulder as a [livestream audience looked on](#). After a few hours, he pointed a videoconferencing tablet at his butter bust and asked Christensen for advice.

Christensen noticed a spot where the symmetry was slightly off. "Cut the cheek back and lift the mouth on this side," she suggested.

Next year, Christensen plans to celebrate 50 years of edible carving by sculpting one last Princess Kay of the Milky Way (the candidate selected as the state's dairy ambassador). Then she'll hand her butter knife to Kulzer, who will take over the storied role.

Butter sculpture displays have been a part of the Minnesota State Fair for more than a century, once famously including a [life-size replica of Teddy Roosevelt, with his foot on a felled lion's neck](#). While other state fairs have butter-carving traditions (Iowa always does cows; Ohio's subjects have ranged from the Liberty Bell to Darth Vader), Minnesota's buttery princesses have the most personality.

The Midwest Dairy Association began commissioning butter likenesses of its dairy princesses in 1965 to promote the state's robust production. Since then, a dozen young women engaged in dairy farming spend a day sitting for their butter portrait each year at the fair.

Among the fair's top attractions, the butter booth draws huge crowds to watch the carver at work. After the fair, the butter heads have been displayed at small-town restaurants, grocery stores and social clubs. They've traveled to speaking engagements and worked their way into local authors' mystery and romance plots. They've even been featured on "Jeopardy" (host Alex Trebek has visited the booth).

The veteran and her apprentice

In July 1972, Christensen had just graduated from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design when the school's placement officer recommended her for an unusual sculpting gig: carving butter at the fair.

Her tryout took place a few weeks later, in the butter-booth cooler. The dairy association's president had brought along his teenage neighbor to model; after a few hours of work, he told Christensen she was hired. "He said, 'I think you're going to do just fine,'" Christensen recalled. "I doubt if I was even halfway done with it."

The first time Christensen carved in front of the fair crowds, she had no idea if she'd be able to finish a whole head in one day or not. "And that, believe me, is the trick," she added. "The trick isn't so much butter. The trick is being able to finish a sculpture a day for 12 days running."

This was just one of the many bits of wisdom Christensen has imparted to her protégé, a 51-year-old artist and educator from Litchfield, Minn.

Kulzer worked in a variety of media — ceramics, photography, computer graphics — before he took up butter. His primary sculpting experience was with clay, including creating original forms for a bronze statue maker specializing in life-size monuments of first responders.

Two years ago, one of Kulzer's former students passed along his name to the Midwest Dairy Association, which led to an audition for Christensen's job. Before his tryout, Kulzer stacked a few blocks of butter together and carved a practice portrait of his daughter.

Last August, Kulzer got his callback to work with Christensen in the cooler. She showed Kulzer how she begins each sculpture by marking a vertical line down the center of the block. Then she carved one side of the face, and had Kulzer replicate her work on the other. The sculpture turned out more coherent than expected. "It gave me a lot of confidence that I could actually do this and make everyone happy," Kulzer said.

Lessons from Linda

The first thing to know about butter sculpting is how to dress for it, considering that it involves spending six to eight hours in a cooler kept just under 40 degrees. The workspace has a revolving floor and fans blowing, too, which adds a windchill. "The weather conditions are very challenging for doing sculpture, that's for sure," Christensen said.

"It starts chilling you inside," Kulzer added.

In the early years, Christensen wore a snowmobile suit covered by an apron, which she frequently switched, because each time she stepped out of the cooler for a break, the accumulated butter melted into the fabric.

Now she swears by warm layers under a rubberized raincoat (Kulzer bought one of the same brand). Bulky mittens won't work for such intricate carving, so Christensen uses dishwashing gloves, while Kulzer prefers rubber-coated cloth gloves used for working in commercial freezers. Unfortunately, those little chemical heating packets don't offer much relief. "My hands just get cold," Christensen said.

Kulzer was pleased to learn Christensen's preferred method for thawing out: head out back to the parking lot and lay your hands on a car that's been baking in the sun for hours. "She knows what to do to survive," Kulzer joked.

In contrast to working with clay, an additive process, butter is sculpted by taking away. The first cuts into the butter block rough out the general features: brow ridges, cheekbones, eye sockets. The artists work with a kit of kitchen knives and clay tools, including stiff wires for slicing and metal loops for digging.

"It's a lot like clay, but it's completely different," Kulzer said, noting that most people don't realize that butter has a bit of a grain. Cold butter is also quite hard, Christensen added.

"When I start using the carving knife, I have to put a lot of English on that thing to get through the butter," she said.

One of Christensen's other secrets is to kneel on the floor in front of the sculpture and look at it from beneath, to make sure the eyes and cheeks have symmetric depth. Fortunately, if the sculptor has taken off a bit too much butter, it's relatively easy to add it back.

"You can't put a great big huge chunk back, but you can sure fix a lot of problems," Christensen explained. "I kind of mush a little butter up, and just soften it a little, and put it in and redo it."

As the world churns

In recent years, most of the princesses Christensen has carved have been related to one of her former subjects — though she hasn't carved a granddaughter yet. The state's most dynamic dairy family, [the Huperts of Randolph](#), counts five dairy princesses in its lineage, plus two more who married in.

While Christensen sculpts, she often asks her subjects about their family's farm, their fair experiences (many are in FFA or 4-H), and what they're studying in college. Over time, she's seen the princesses' career pursuits expand from mostly female-dominated fields, such as elementary education and nursing, to greater interest in animal science and taking over the family dairy business.

The other big change Christensen has observed, of course, is the hair. She likes the longer hairstyles currently in fashion, so she can swirl or swoop her subject's locks for a bit more artistic flair. But Christensen also enjoyed replicating the sky-high styles of the 1980s ("What do they call them? Mall 'dos?" she asked) and relished the challenge they presented. "I had a fun time with some of those because I added butter on for those big high bangs, or those great big wings on the side."

When Christensen finishes each sculpture, she turns it around so the公主 can see it. Once, years ago, she didn't realize that the bolts on the sculpture's pedestal had loosened, and when she spun the butter head, and it flopped, face-first, onto the floor. (Despite the booth's soundproofing, she could hear the crowd scream.) Fortunately, it suffered only a smashed cheek, which Christensen quickly repaired.

The old practice of visitors eating the butter tailings, spread on soda crackers, while they watched Christensen work, has gone extinct. Today, the scraps go to the princesses, along with their sculptures, which have been parceled in hunks and given to friends as graduation gifts, donated to school cafeterias, or used to bake countless cookies.

The butter busts have been displayed at weddings — one past princess commissioned Kulzer to be shown at her fiancé's, to accompany hers on their reception table. Some have been devoured at community corn feeds and pancake breakfasts.

One 1980 butter head remains in storage after all these years, with no plans of going anywhere, said its owner, Donna Moenning (nee Schmidt). "This piece of personal and Minnesota history is at home next to the frozen beef, pork and vegetables in our freezer like it has been for 40 years."

Art that honors

To some historians, the edible sculptures are a marriage of Minnesota's creative and agricultural traditions.

"We have lots of music, theater and visual artists, and we also have a lot of cows and corn," explained Linda Koutsky, co-author of "Minnesota State Fair: An Illustrated History." "They came together at the State Fair with butter carving."

While Kulzer helped the butter-carving with his artistic ability, his farming heritage earned secure the gig, Christensen said. Kulzer, who grew up on a crop farm near Sauk Centre, Minn., relished helping his family make its own butter using milk from his uncle's nearby dairy farm. ("Part of the reason I loved it is because I wasn't milking cows all the time," he admitted.)

Kulzer said he's happy that his sculpting can recognize a group of Minnesotans he often take for granted. "It's a performance that highlights all the work of the farmers of the state," he said.

He marvels at how Christensen makes butter sculpting look easy — "She just comes in, 'Here we go, Doot de doot de doo,' and there it is!" — and feels grateful to take on her mantle. "It's a huge honor and a lot of responsibility to jump in her shoes and try to do what she has done for so many years," he said.

Rachel Hutton is a general assignment reporter in features for the Star Tribune. rachel.hutton@startribune.com | 612-673-4569 | [rachel_hutton](https://twitter.com/rachel_hutton)

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