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The Minnesota State Fair is canceled, but butter sculpting goes on

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Linda Christensen at work in 2003

Photo: Star Tribune via Getty Images (Getty Images)

The one thing I truly, truly regret about this pandemic summer is that I won't get to go to the Minnesota State Fair. I'd heard of its greatness for years, mostly about the range of foods available on sticks, but it never really registered until a few months ago when I met someone from Minneapolis who went to the fair every summer and described in great and loving detail all the food one

could eat there—way more than deep-fried carnival stuff, but actual food prepared in ovens by some of the city’s and state’s best restaurants. (We were on a winter camping trip at the time, and these descriptions generally occurred during the late afternoon when we were gathering wood for our evening cooking fire and were very hungry.) I resolved then and there to make my way to the Twin Cities in the summer to experience it for myself. And then we all went into quarantine and the fair, like everything else, was canceled.

There are compensations. *Eater* has published a guide to some of the best fair booths that are still serving at brick-and-mortar restaurants. Some of the fair exhibitions have gone virtual. And, most important, the butter sculptures will

continue.

Like all the best state fairs, Minnesota has its signature butter exhibit: the bust of Princess Kay Of The Milky Way. Princess Kay is the state's dairy princess. She's been crowned at every fair since 1954; since 1965, her bust has been sculpted in butter to remind the world that Minnesota is the nation's top butter producer. (You know, just in case Land O Lakes isn't enough.) For the past 48 years, every Princess Kay and the other nine finalists have sat for Linda Christensen. But this year, that's different, too.

Christensen, you see, lives in California, and the pandemic will prevent her from traveling to Minnesota. But the good news is, she has an apprentice. His name is Gerry Kulzer, and he lives in Litchfield, Minnesota, about an hour and a half from the Twin Cities. This year, the butter knife will be passed (though

Christensen reserves the right to take it back next year). “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,” *The New York Times* reports.

This will be a trial by fire—metaphorically speaking—for Kulzer, who will have to sculpt all ten busts by himself, one a day for ten days. Each sculpture takes six to eight hours and requires 90 pounds of butter. In an ordinary year, the refrigerated carving booth (set to 38 degrees) is a fair exhibition, and visitors can walk by and chat with Princess Kay and her court. This year, however, the event will be broadcast on Facebook. Kulzer says he’s relieved about that.

“It’s a little scary,” he told the *Times*. “I’m going to be doing everything, and I was looking forward to picking up more tricks,

and studying [Christensen's] methods of working and having her as a partner to rely on and lean on.... [But] I don't have to think of the thousands and thousands of people watching me every day.”

One thing won't change: as in years past, Princess Kay and the finalists will be able to keep their busts once the exhibition is over. Most chop them up and eat them or donate them to food pantries, but one past princess has kept her bust in the freezer for more than 50 years.