

ART

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Written By: Carolyn Lange | Aug 5th 2020

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Gerry Kulzer, of Litchfield, is in the hot seat in a very cold room this year, carving the likenesses of Minnesota's 10 dairy princesses out of blocks of butter. An apprenticeship that was started last year was supposed to continue this year, with Kulzer working under the tutelage of the woman who's been carving the butter heads for nearly 50 years. But COVID-19 is preventing that artist from traveling from California to Minnesota so Kulzer will be carving the butter heads alone as his mentor — and millions of spectators — watch online.



Gerry Kulzer sculpts a bust of Jenna Tantilla during the two-day Hutchinson Art Fair. Submitted photo

LITCHFIELD — For a man who grew up drawing pictures and making homemade butter, Gerry Kulzer's next gig is a perfect fit.

The professional sculptor and art teacher, who lives in Litchfield, will be carving the individual likenesses of 10 Minnesota women from 90-pound blocks of butter this month as part of the Midwest Dairy Association's annual Princess Kay of the Milky Way promotion that is traditionally conducted during the Minnesota State Fair.



Gerry Kulzer, of Litchfield, will be carving the likenesses of the Minnesota Princess Kay of the Milky way and nine dairy princess finalists this month. He was supposed to have continued an apprenticeship this year with Linda Christensen, who carved the butter heads for 48 years. COVID is preventing her from traveling from her home in California to Minnesota, so Kulzer is stepping into the job as Christensen advises him remotely. Next year Christensen will come to Minnesota for her 50th— and final — carving before turning over the butter knife to Kulzer. Submitted photo

He couldn't be more excited.

"I'm honored and so thankful the Midwest Dairy Association chose me to carry on this exciting, fun thing for the princesses," he said. "It's an honor to represent the dairy farmers of the region that work so hard every day."

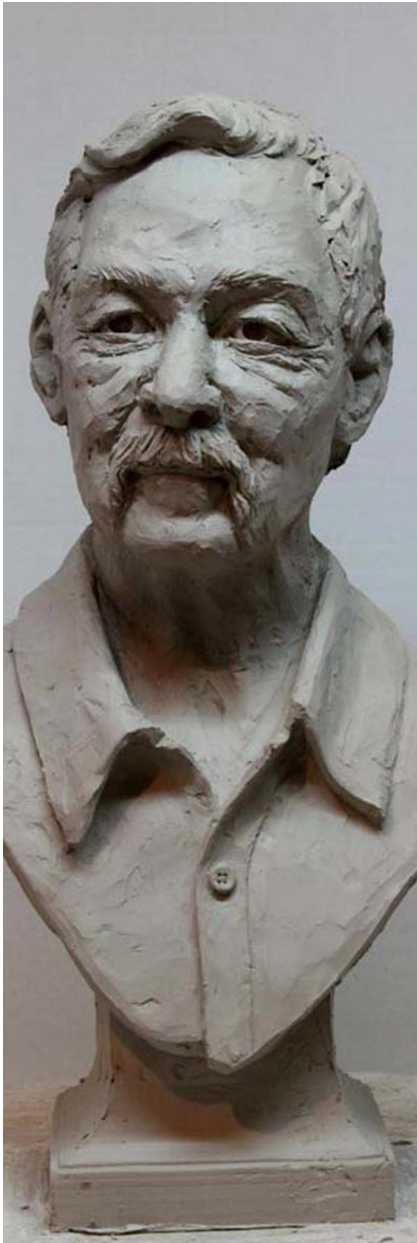
Although the State Fair is canceled this year because of COVID-19, the crowning of the 2020–21 Princess Kay from the slate of 10 finalists will still take place next week — and so will the carving of the butter heads.

Both events will be live-streamed on the Princess Kay Facebook page for all to watch.



Butter sculptor Linda Christensen creates the butter likeness of Amy Kylo, the 66th Princess Kay of the Milky Way, in August 2019. Since Christensen lives in California, Litchfield artist Gerry Kulzer will sculpt all 10 butter sculptures of the finalists this year. Photo courtesy of Midwest Dairy

This was to have been the 49th year that longtime Princess Kay butter artist, Linda Christensen, would carve the butter heads while sitting in a refrigerated, rotating glass studio on the fairgrounds. It's an art she's perfected over the decades and she was ready to hand over the



carving knife to someone else next year, on her 50th year at the fair. But COVID-19 put a halt to Christensen's plans to travel from her home in California to Minnesota this year.

That's where Kulzer comes in.

Butter art

A number of years ago, after he had watched Christensen carve the butter heads at the fair, Kulzer sent a letter to the Midwest Dairy Association saying that if they ever needed a replacement when Christensen retired, he would be interested.

With years of experience as an art teacher at area K-12 schools and hours spent doing live carving demonstrations and working in his home studio sculpting busts of real and historical figures in clay that are then fired or cast in bronze or cast resin, Kulzer eyed the butter heads as a challenge he would be professionally equipped to handle.

Two years ago Kulzer got the call he had been waiting for from the Midwest Dairy Association and was asked to come for an audition of sorts. He was given a massive block of butter and a female model and started carving.

It was apparently good enough because last year Kulzer spent several days working alongside Christensen at the State Fair. She graciously gave up some of her secrets for carving the dairy princess butter heads.

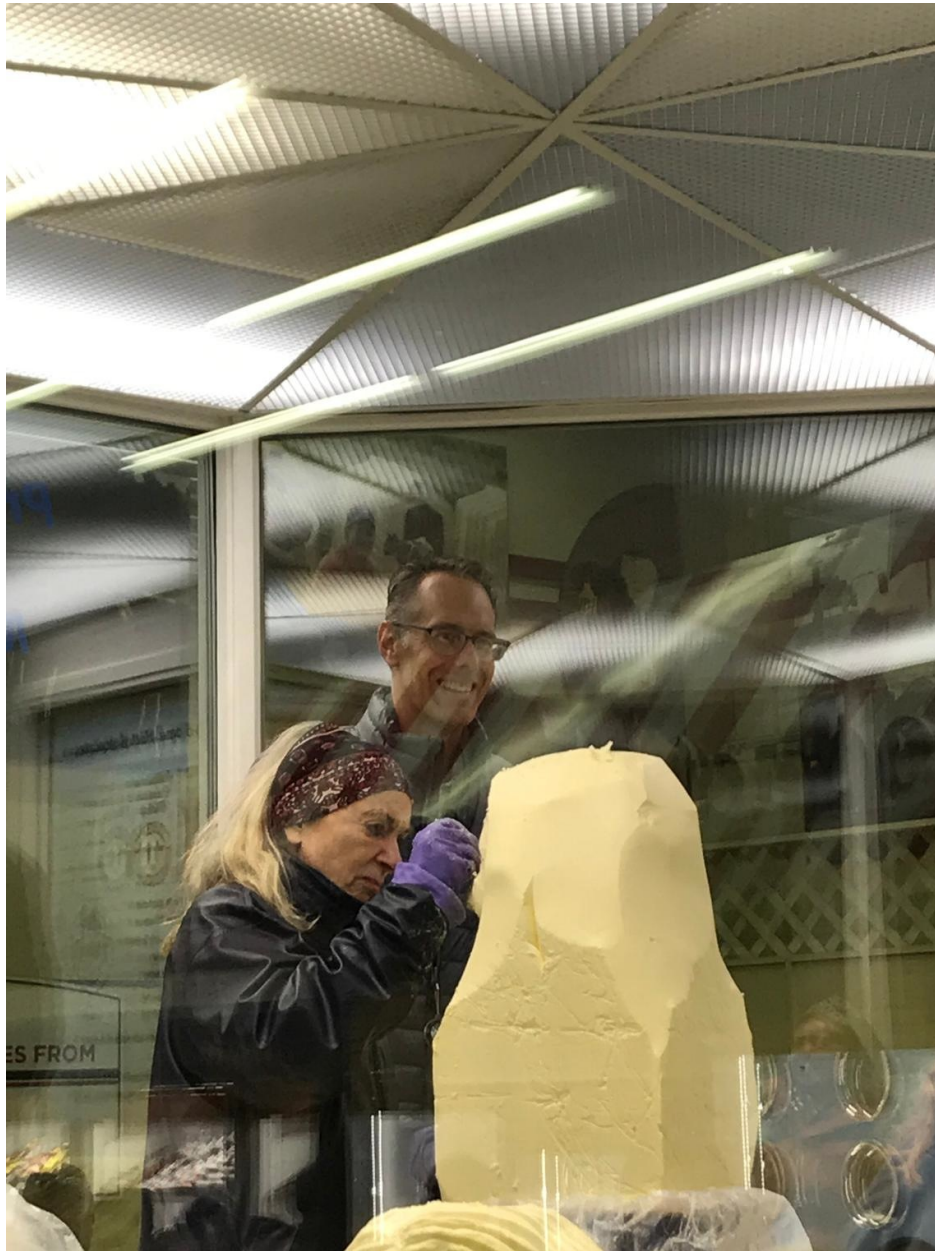
"She showed me how she does things," said Kulzer in a telephone interview.

Gerry Kulzer carved this clay sculpture of Atwater-Cosmos-Grove City Elementary Maintenance Engineer Gregg Kragenbring that was created while teaching art at the school. Submitted photo

Christensen not only had advice about turning ice-cold butter into the cheerful face of a dairy princess, she also had tips about the proper way to layer warm clothes underneath a sturdy raincoat that repels the oily butter chips that fly off the block.

During the apprenticeship last year, Christensen carved one half of a sculpted face and Kulzer did the other half as he tried to match her style.

He said it was satisfying to "work with a master and still achieve something that looked like a cohesive piece of art."



Gerry Kulzer, of Litchfield, watches as Linda Christensen carves a butter head last year at the Minnesota State Fair. Kulzer will be carving the likenesses of the Minnesota Princess Kay of the Milky way and nine dairy princess finalists this month. He was supposed to have continued an apprenticeship this year with Christensen but COVID is preventing her from traveling from her home in California to Minnesota. Kulzer will do all the carving this year as Christensen advises him remotely, with viewers able to watch live video updates. Next year Christensen will come to Minnesota for her 50th— and final — carving before turning over the butter knife to Kulzer. Submitted photo

Learning the craft

This year the plan was for Kulzer to carve three or four butter heads by himself — with Christensen by his side — and then the master would do the rest. Instead, Kulzer will do them all himself, but Christensen will be by his side virtually from California, watching through a video link and giving advice as Kulzer carves.

In an effort to duplicate the real-life State Fair event as much as possible, Kulzer will be carving the butter heads in the rotating, refrigerated studio on the fairgrounds as the princess for the day is seated nearby. Usually, the princess is also in the cold gallery, but Kulzer said this year each will be seated outside where it's warm.

Usually, thousands of people watch the process at the State Fair. This year, live updates will be available on the Princess Kay Facebook page, where it could be viewed by millions of people.

But just like the real deal, Kulzer will have eight hours to carve each sculpture.

Completing one sculpture every day for 10 days — in a 40-degree room that turns fingers stiff and cold — will be challenging.

“It gets pretty darn cold after a while, but being in Minnesota we're kind of used to that,” he said.

Although clay is a more forgiving medium, Kulzer said he's determined to make each butter sculpture a true representation of each woman.

“Every face is a little different and you try to find those differences,” he said. The angle of the cheekbone, the shape of the eyes and nose come together to make the whole person, he said.

“You can get that shape and likeness, but to get the personality into it, that's the real challenge,” he said. The particular characteristics of butter, the 8-hour timeframe and the cold conditions make that even more difficult.

The Princess Kay of the Milky Way will be crowned Wednesday, Aug. 12.

Kulzer begins carving the next day and will finish the last butter head Aug. 22.

Kulzer said he hopes that he improves with each sculpture he carves this year and that next year he'll be fully equipped to take over from Christensen and continue the legacy.

“I hope I can get better as I go and I hope I can capture that personality as I work on these butter heads,” he said. “I want to be a great representative for the Midwest Dairy Association and all the dairy farmers out there. I really want to make these princesses look beautiful and capture their personalities.”

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The finished bust of Jenna Tantilla sculpted by Gerry Kulzer. Submitted photo

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