

NEWS

After a half-century, Minnesota State Fair butter sculptor puts finishing touches on her final work of art

On Friday, Linda Christensen will pass on the esteemed role to her successor, sculptor Gerry Kulzer.





Linda Christensen, right, works on a butter sculpture of the 2021 Princess Kay of the Milky Way, Anna Euerle, in the dairy building at the Minnesota State Fair in Falcon Heights on Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021. Christensen will retire this year from creating the butter sculpture of Princess Kay after doing so for 50 years, passing the job on to her successor, artist and Minnesota native Gerry Kulzer. Christensen began sculpting Princess Kay and finalists in 1972, shortly after graduating from Minneapolis College of Art and Design. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

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Clad in winter gear from head to toe in the middle of summer and carrying her trusty sculpting tools, Linda Christensen stepped into the refrigerated glass booth in the Dairy Building at the Minnesota State Fair on Thursday morning, eager to get going on turning butter into a bust for the 50th and final year.

Following closely behind was Anna Euerle, the newly crowned 68th Princess Kay of the Milky Way. She will be Christensen's last "butterhead," as she calls her work, which arguably is among the most recognized hallmarks of Minnesota culture, right up there with Paul Bunyan and lutefisk.

Their presence came with much fanfare. Local and national media outlets were on hand to cover the quirky tradition, while Fairgoers on the event's first day in more than a year took cellphone pics and videos in between licks of ice cream cones and sips of milkshakes. Just minutes earlier, Gov. Tim Walz surprised Christensen outside the Dairy Building with a proclamation declaring Friday as "Linda Christensen Day" in Minnesota.

"Linda Christensen has spent five decades, in 40-degree temperatures, carving more than 550 sculptures out of 41,500 pounds of butter in front of thousands of fairgoers," Walz read from the proclamation. "Linda Christensen has impacted the lives of more than 550 young dairy leaders and countless others in Minnesota by bringing dairy farm stories to life at the Minnesota State Fair."

But alas, Christensen, 79, decided this year is as good as any to step away from the State Fair art form that has brought her international fame and personal delight for a half-century. She will pass on the esteemed role to her successor, Litchfield, Minn., sculptor Gerry Kulzer.



Linda Christensen, right, carves a butter bust of Bridget Hendrickson, left, the 1992 Princess Kay of the Milky Way, at the Minnesota State Fair in Falcon Heights on Aug. 27, 1992. (Jean Pieri / Pioneer Press)

“It’s time,” Christensen, a Minneapolis native who lives in Oceanside, Calif., near San Diego, said earlier this week. “People used to ask me, ‘How much longer are you going to keep doing this?’ And I say, ‘Until I can’t.’ Well, I decided that day isn’t going to come. But it does become more difficult for me. And I figure 50 is a good round number to call it a day.”

But first Christensen has one more likeness to carve from what started as a 90-pound block of butter, a love affair that takes her about six hours to complete. Crowned on Wednesday night, Euerle’s first official duty as Fair ambassador for the state dairy industry was to sit for the traditional three-dimensional chilled artwork. The significance of the moment was not lost on the 19-year-old, who while growing up would see Christensen and dairy princesses in the same butter-sculpting booth where she now sat.

“It’s absolutely surreal,” Euerle said from inside the booth, which rotates slowly so Fairgoers can get good views of Christensen’s work. “And Gerry, the new sculptor, is from my hometown, Litchfield. But I’m just really excited to be in the butter booth with Linda for her last butterhead.”

On Friday, after finishing up with Euerle, Christensen will pass on one of her sculpting tools, which she calls “old faithful,” to Kulzer as part of her retirement ceremony, scheduled for 5:30 p.m. at the butter booth. On Saturday, Kulzer will officially take over as the resident butter sculptor and begin carving this year’s nine Princess Kay finalists.



Wearing a face shield, 2021 Princess Kay of the Milky Way Anna Euerle has her likeness carved into a block of butter in the dairy building at the Minnesota State Fair in Falcon Heights on Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

Last year, the butter-sculpting tradition carried on, despite the COVID-19-caused cancellation of the Fair. Kulzer, who usually works with clay, was in the butter booth sculpting Princess Kay's likeness while Christensen, who did not travel last year from California, was there via Zoom. "It was a collaboration," Kulzer said Thursday morning from the Dairy Building.

Kulzer marveled at Christensen's progress on her last butterhead. He said following in her footsteps will be a "daunting task."

"I'll be coming in after a beloved sculptor who's been working here for 50 years," Kulzer, 52, said. "I mean, I look at her sculpture already, and she is so fast. It's so impressive the things that she can do. I don't think I can compare."

A FAIR HISTORY OF BUTTER

Various butter sculptures were featured at the State Fair from 1898 through 1927. In 1965, the American Dairy Association of Minnesota began the tradition of having the likenesses of dairy princesses sculpted in butter.

Christensen was fresh out of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 1972, when the general manager of the dairy association, Cliff Markuson, called the school, looking for someone to succeed their butter sculptor of about five years.

For an audition, Christensen carved a neighborhood girl's bust out of butter, her first time working with that medium. A month later, she was going around and around in the booth with one princess at a time, chiseling the likenesses of the young women out of butter.

“At that time, the butter blocks started out at 68 pounds apiece,” she recalled of her first go-around. “And they paid me \$600 for the whole Fair. For me, that was an overwhelming amount of money. I was thrilled. Who knew it was going to turn into something like this?”

Christensen knows of few, if any, artists that work with blocks of butter, which was popularized at world fairs in Chicago and St. Louis around the turn of the century. Her fame for working with butter has spread, so to speak.



The 66th Princess Kay of the Milky Way, 19-year-old Amy Kylo from Byron, Minn. has her likeness carved into butter by Linda Christensen on the first day the Minnesota State Fair in Falcon Heights on Thursday, August 22, 2019. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

“People know about it in Europe,” she said. “People know about it all over.”

Over the years, Christensen has sculpted likenesses in butter of Elvis Presley, Dolly Parton and Michael Jackson at the Mid-South Fair in Memphis, Tenn., and bear cubs out of 200-pound blocks for Cub Foods store openings in the Twin Cities. David Letterman and Big Bird were once butterheads.

She said she will miss getting to know the proud dairy princesses and their families — and seeing them year after year.

“As it turned out, this is my real art,” she said, “and I’ve had a lot of fun with it. There’s a lot that goes with it that people don’t see just from what I do in the butter booth. I meet people from all over the state. I’ve gotten to know a lot about dairy farming. One family has seven butterheads in the family. It’s kind of old-home week when I come back here.”

HOW IT’S DONE

To create the butter busts, Christensen uses a half-dozen clay-sculpting tools and several knives.

“My first batch of tools was stolen one year,” she said Thursday while in the butter booth. “So these ones are only about 30-years old.”

To get the basic shape, she pulled a wire on the corners of the butter block, making sure the chunks ended up in a 5-gallon bucket so they could be given to Euerle. The princesses take their sculptures, and the scraps, with them when the Fair ends. Many have a community corn feed and use the butter.

That’s what Theresa Reps, a Princess Kay finalist in 2011, did, recalling Thursday at the butter booth how she gave the scraps to family and friends. After a year in a freezer, her butter bust was melted down and used for a corn feed in Olmsted County.

“It looked amazing, looked just like me,” Reps said of her likeness in butter. “But I used it. It’s great butter.”

For the past five years, Reps has been the agricultural affairs manager for Midwest Dairy, the organization that sponsors the Princess Kay program. She called Christensen’s retirement “bittersweet.”

“It’s sad to see her go,” Reps said. “But she’s done an amazing job and she’s ready to relax and enjoy the Fair for what it is without having to be in a cooler for 12 days.”

Cyndie Gurley was among the scores of Fairgoers watching Christensen do her thing. Before Thursday, Gurley, a Minnesota native who lives in Florida, hadn’t been to the State Fair in nearly 50 years.

“I had three goals today here at the State Fair,” Gurley, 67, said. “I wanted a Pronto Pup, Tom Thumb Donuts and to see Princess Kay of the Milky Way being carved in butter.”

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