

STATE FAIR

# Longtime Minnesota State Fair butter sculptor hands off butter knife

Anna Euerle, the fair's 68th Princess Kay of the Milky Way, was the subject of the 79-year-old Linda Christensen's final butterhead.

By Alex Chhith (<https://www.startribune.com/alex-chhith/7053975/>) Star Tribune |

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After a half-century of fashioning 90-pound blocks of butter into busts of dairy princesses at the Minnesota State Fair, sculptor Linda Christensen on Friday night handed her knife to a successor.

Present for the occasion at the fair's Dairy Barn were family members, friends and, of course, throngs of people enjoying ice cream cones and cups of fresh milk.

Anna Euerle, the fair's 68th Princess Kay of the Milky Way, was the subject of the 79-year-old Christensen's final butterhead. Euerle said that inside the rotating refrigerator where the sculpting is done, Christensen "said she would put all her emotions into carving."

"To be able to sit in the presence of a legend is truly amazing," Euerle said.

Christensen's butterheads have spread, so to speak. Over the years, they have toured the country and been featured on national news programs; one even made an appearance on "Jeopardy!" A 300-pound butter sculpture of Big Bird for "Sesame Street's" live performance in Minneapolis won Christensen and her children an invitation to a cast party.

Over the decades, her favorite task, she said, was sitting in the big refrigerated room working with her jacket on and exchanging stories with her royal subjects as hundreds of fascinated eyes peered in to watch.

On Friday, Christensen handed her butter knife, nicknamed "Old Faithful," to her successor, Gerry Kulzer of Litchfield, Minn.



LEILA NAVIDI - STAR TRIBUNE

Linda Christensen sculpted a butterhead of Anna Euerle, the 2021 Princess Kay of the Milky Way, on Friday in the Dairy Barn at the

The knife is "only 30 years old," Christensen said. It was part of a replacement kit to her original carving tools, which were stolen.

In an emotional speech, Christensen recalled getting to know all her subjects, some of whom were descendants of or otherwise related to former Princess Kay candidates. For instance, Euerle's sister, Melissa Tangen, was a candidate in 2004.

"In one [family], I've done more than one generation, I've done cousins, I've done aunts, I've done nieces, I've done sisters and I never did a granddaughter, but I could've," said Christensen, a Minnesota native who now lives in California.

For the past few years, Christensen has been working with Kulzer, not only teaching him how to carve butter, but also tricks like pressing fingers numbed from carving cold butter to warm windshields that have been sitting in the sweltering sun in the parking lot.

"Fifty is when I said I was going to retire, and it's just a nice round number," she said in an interview. "It really is time for me to pass the butter knife to a younger person while I still can."

Christensen made her first butter cut in 1972 shortly after she graduated from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. The Midwest Dairy Association had begun commissioning butter likenesses of its dairy princesses in 1965 to promote the state's robust dairy industry.

The only year in Christensen's career that she missed was last year, when the COVID-19 pandemic led to the fair's cancellation. Even then, she gave Kulzer tips via video.

This year's State Fair is different from its predecessors in that COVID is still a threat. Attendance on the fair's first day, Thursday, was less than half of what it was on the first day of the 2019 and 2018 fairs.

While Christensen's work is on display for tens of thousands of people to see every year, it's the conversations in the rotating refrigerator that she'll remember best, she said.

"Everyone ... keeps thanking me," she said. "I keep telling them how much they've done for me. [Butter sculpting] has become a huge part of my life and identity."

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In 1991, Linda Christensen sculpted in butter Angela Kern, 19, of Waseca, who was one of 11 Princess Kay of the Milky Way candidates that year.