

State Fair

Minnesota State Fair's new butter carver prepares to create 'dairy' good art

Estelle Timar-Wilcox St. Paul August 25, 2022 5:00 AM



Butter carver Gerry Kulzer carves a likeness of Princess Kay of the Milky Way in a 90-pound block of butter. Kulzer is the new lead butter carver at the Minnesota State Fair. Courtesy Becky Church | Midwest Dairy

As the rest of Minnesota prepares for two weeks in the sun at the State Fair, Gerry Kulzer is preparing his parka, gloves and carving tools.

He'll be spending the fair in a 40-degree cooler, carving a new larger-than-life sculpture every day — in butter. And he couldn't be more excited.

"This is the best job in the world," Kulzer said.

It's his first year as the State Fair's lead butter carver, and Kulzer is carrying on an extensive legacy. Former carver Linda Christensen sculpted some 500 faces in butter over the past 50 years, before putting down her knife last August.

Butter carving is a long-running tradition at the State Fair. It's part of the Princess Kay of the Milky Way competition, which brings 10 finalists from around the state to compete for the crown. Princess Kay serves as an ambassador for Midwest Dairy for the year, and she and the other nine finalists all sit for a sculpting session.

Kulzer, of Litchfield, Minn., isn't a newcomer to the tradition.

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"Long ago I would visit the State Fair and watch Linda, because that was really the only place that you could see a sculptor work without knocking on their door," he said.

Kulzer was so captivated watching her carve that, many years ago, he reached out to Midwest Dairy, offering himself up as the next sculptor in case they ever needed one.





Butter carver Gerry Kulzer (right) carves a likeness of Princess Kay of the Milky Way in a 90-pound block of butter. Courtesy Becky Church | Midwest Dairy

He didn't hear back for several years — until 2018, when the dairy group gave him a call. Christensen was getting ready to retire, and it was time to select the next carver-in-chief.

The audition was the first time Kulzer had done a full sculpture in butter. He sculpted one face from a photo, and then tag-teamed a sculpture with Christiansen.

“She did one side, showing me how she does an eye or whatever, and then I would do the other side,” Kulzer said. “And when it was finished, it looked awesome. They liked what they saw.”

Kulzer has been shadowing Christiansen for the last few fairs to learn the craft. This year, for the first time, he'll be doing all 10 sculptures by himself.

He's excited for the task — and a little nervous to be going in alone.

“She was the master, and if something went wrong, she was there, things could be corrected,” Kulzer said. “This year that's not the case. I gotta make sure I do everything right.”

It's not an easy job. The hours are long, the air is cold, and the chilly butter and constant work leave his hands stiff by the end of the day.

“You're in this environment, this 40-degree cooler, for eleven days,” Kulzer said. “I've found that the cold kind of seeps into you as the day progresses, I get colder and colder, and those 15-minute breaks that we take don't really warm me up.”

But Kulzer loves it all the same.

It's a unique way to do what he truly loves: teaching.

When he's not sculpting head after head in 90-pound blocks of butter, Kulzer is a school art teacher.

“The thing that was appealing is the education factor,” Kulzer said. “You’re demonstrating a craft, you’re showing people how this is done, and, being a teacher, that’s what I’ve always been about.”

And it’s a chance to teach something else: the ins and outs of dairy farming.

Kulzer has a first-hand appreciation of the industry. He grew up on a farm.

“Growing up, picking rocks, baling hay, always the hottest days of the year when we’re doing this stuff — it was not fun,” Kulzer said. “Being cold for a little while? That’s nothing compared to what the farmers and dairy producers are doing day in and day out.”

He learns a lot, too. Princess Kay and the runners-up do interviews throughout the day while they sit for the sculptures, giving visitors the chance to ask them questions. One of Kulzer’s favorite parts of the job is listening to their stories of life on the farm.

Sculpting is a very different career path, but he’s grateful for his job’s unique connection to the farming business.

“I hope the visitors realize that, yes, this is a fascinating thing to watch, but it’s all because of the effort that the farmers put into their livelihood and their final product,” Kulzer said.

Fairgoers can watch Kulzer sculpt in the dairy building starting the first day of the fair. At the end of the fair, the sculptures will be on display for a day. Once the gates close and the crowds head home, candidates get to keep their larger-than-life likenesses.

And Kulzer gets to warm up and put down his knife – until next year.

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