

# Mpls St Paul



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## Meet the Minnesota State Fair's Butter Sculptor

High school art teacher and professional sculptor Gerry Kulzer will once again carve the state's dairy princesses using a legen-

## dairy ingredient: butter.

by Rebecca Mennecke



*Courtesy of Midwest Dairy*

When local artist and sculptor Gerry Kulzer first dipped his hands in clay at the [University of Minnesota Duluth](https://www.d.umn.edu/) , little did the now-[Eden Valley-Watkins School](https://www.ev.w.k12.mn.us/) art teacher and father of five know that he would someday change his medium—from clay to cream—as the [Minnesota State Fair](https://www.mnstatefair.org/) 's second butter sculptor in almost 50 years.

Last year, the artist—raised on a grain farm in Sauk Centre, where his mother made butter from the cream of whole milk—took the reins from longtime butter sculptor [Linda Christensen](#)

<https://mspmag.com/arts-and-culture/qa-linda-christensen-state-fair-butter-sculptor/> , who has transformed about 44,100 pounds of Grade A butter into almost 500 lifelike busts of State Fair royalty since 1972. The tradition celebrates Minnesota's self-proclaimed status as the "Butter Capital of the Nation."

"I can't tell you how honored I am to be able to do my part in bringing recognition to the dairy farm families, who work tirelessly seven days a week to produce the milk that goes into butter, ice cream, and all the other delicious dairy products that I love," says Kulzer, who is also the owner and principal artist of [Kulzer Design Studios](https://www.kulzerdesign.com/) <https://www.kulzerdesign.com/> .

In college, Kulzer majored in art education with an emphasis in ceramics and was offered a studio assistant gig by professors Thomas Kerrigan and James Klueg. As he mixed clay and glazes, he steadily gained the confidence to explore all aspects of ceramic work. During an apprenticeship with Bob Eckels of Bayfield's [Eckels Pottery and Fine Craft Gallery](https://www.eckelspottery.com/) <https://www.eckelspottery.com/> , he finally found his calling: sculpting faces and portraits. He has since created busts of notable figures including [Prince](https://www.instagram.com/p/Bh-VdkZF68D/?hl=en) <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bh-VdkZF68D/?hl=en> and [Clive Owen](https://www.instagram.com/p/BtpYAr6gFwu/?hl=en) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtpYAr6gFwu/?hl=en> .

Though Kulzer's mostly known for his clay work, he initially became captivated by the butter-sculpting process when he caught Christensen at (butter-sculpting) work. "It was fascinating to see the process from start to finish," he says, noting that this was at a time when the Internet did not yet exist—to see the artist at work, you had to go to the Minnesota State Fair IRL.

In 2018, as Christensen sought to retire, [Midwest Dairy <http://midwestdairy.com>](http://midwestdairy.com) asked Kulzer to "audition" for the buttery role. "They must have liked what I did, because the following year, they asked me back," he says. In 2019, he and Christensen tag-teamed on a singular sculpture, and the next year the pair planned to collab again, with Kulzer tackling three or four of the buttery busts, which are part of the annual exhibit sponsored by about 2,200 dairy farmers across the state.

But Christensen—who moved from her native Minneapolis to sunny California about two decades ago—was unable to travel to Minnesota in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which also canceled the State Fair (but not the butter sculpting!), so Kulzer got creative, dialing in Christensen to an iPad mounted in the butter booth via Zoom. Remotely, Christensen offered guidance on the creation of the sculptures. The following year, Christensen carved her final butter sculptures before passing the torch—*er*, a kitchen knife that she dubbed "Old Faithful"—to Kulzer in 2022.

“I’m a very emotional person, so it was hard *not* to let my eyes well up with tears when Linda handed me her prized carving knife,” Kulzer says. “It’s still such an awe-inspiring experience for me.”

The changing of the guard garnered significant media attention last year, capturing coverage from

*The New York Times*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/23/dining/minnesota-state-fair-butter-sculpture.html> and *The*

*Washington Post*

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/09/10/butter-sculpture-dairy-minnesota-fair/> in addition to lines

by local outlets such as *Minnesota Public Radio*

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2022/08/25/minnesota-state-fairs-new-butter-carver-prepares-to-create-dairy-good-art> and the *Star Tribune*

<https://www.startribune.com/longtime-minnesota-state-fair-butter-sculptor-hands-off-butter-knife/600091706/> .

This year, Kulzer is once again faced with the challenge of carving 10 busts from blocks of butter, exclusively produced for the Minnesota State Fair by *Associated Milk Producers Inc.*

<https://www.ampi.com/> in New Ulm—the largest cheese co-op in the country. Completing each bust is a lengthy process that takes about six to eight hours, Kulzer says. “The most challenging part is to achieve a likeness in under eight hours, while working in two layers of gloves, in a 40-degree cooler, while people watch,” he says. “Specifically, the eyes are always a challenge because they’re the ‘window to the soul.’ If

you don't have the eyes right, the rest doesn't look right either.”

Compared to using clay, butter has less plasticity, Kulzer says, which can make it tougher for the bust to appear more alive. There's an obvious difference when it comes to temperature, as well. “My fingers are never cold when I work in my studio on a clay project,” he says.

Kulzer's work begins on the opening day of the Fair, starting with Princess Kay of the Milky Way, followed by the nine finalists of the statewide [Dairy Princess Program](https://www.midwestdairy.com/young-dairy-leaders/dairy-princesses/) of Midwest Dairy. Kulzer says if you visit the Dairy Building (located on the corner of Judson Avenue and Underwood Street) around noon, you'll see the buttery block as it resembles each person's facial shape. By 5 p.m., Kulzer has refined the bust's details.

“I love what I do at the State Fair,” Kulzer says, “but it wouldn't be possible without the farmers who've put in so much time and effort to make sure their cows are well cared for and can produce the milk we drink and the cheese curds we eat.”

It takes about 2.5 gallons (21.8 pounds) of whole milk to make a pound of butter, according to the Minnesota State Fair's website, so each 90-pound block of butter represents 1,962 pounds of milk.

“Growing up on a farm, I know firsthand the work involved,” he adds. “It impresses me to no end that we're able to enjoy dairy products by simply going to the grocery store and picking up a pail of ice cream. We kind of take it for granted and don't really think about what's all involved.”

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Check out more of Gerry Kulzer's work on his Instagram at [@kulzerdesign](https://www.instagram.com/kulzerdesign/) <<https://www.instagram.com/kulzerdesign/?hl=en>> .



Rebecca Mennecke is an award-winning journalist who tells meaningful stories of the Twin Cities community as the Assistant Editor of Mpls.St.Paul Magazine.

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