



BY THE WAY

At agriculture Disneyland, butter princesses reign supreme

Where can you find dairy royalty, pork chops on a stick and Sen. Amy Klobuchar? The Minnesota State Fair.



By [Natalie B. Compton](#)

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — Yahan Hu approached the [Minnesota State Fair](#) Adventure Park kiosk and bought one ticket for the Slingshot. For \$35, the ride catapults customers strapped in a metal sphere cage hundreds of feet skyward at 100 mph. It whips them upside down a few times before bringing them back to earth discombobulated. It was a natural next step for Hu, a 27-year-old PhD student from China, after trying the Skyscraper, another high-speed contraption that hurtles passengers in loops like a giant yo-yo.

Both rides are \$28 if you get the early-bird special — and people do. In the tender waking hours of the day, as Americans across the country had their first sips of coffee, fairgoers were serenaded by the bloodcurdling screams of Adventure Park masochists.

Like [at the airport](#), conventional norms of time do not apply at the “Great Minnesota Get-Together.” Start your morning with whiplash at the Adventure Park. Chase it with fried cheese curd tacos. [Any food](#) is fair game at any given moment — so long as that food is fried, served in a bucket or on a stick.

But the fair’s true heart is farm culture.



“Kids that have never seen a farm realize that food just doesn’t magically appear on their table,” said Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.). “They see the biggest pig, they see the biggest pumpkin — and it really brings our state together.” She spent her childhood going to the fair and is still a regular.

When it began in 1854 (before the state was even a state!), the fair showcased agriculture and encouraged farming in the region. It’s since grown into the biggest state fair in the country by daily attendance, pulling in millions of visitors for 12 days before Labor Day to test farming equipment, inspect livestock, learn about beekeeping and admire giant produce.

It’s agriculture Disneyland, with rides, butter princesses, smoked turkey legs and a serious contingent of super fans who were bewitched by the fair as kids and return every year as adults.

Sports Center-meets-animal maternity ward

The CHS Miracle Of Birth Center is the fair’s “It’s a Small World”: family-friendly and feel-good. Depending on which entrance you use, it’s one of the first things you see. Inside the center, animals give birth daily with the help of volunteers from the Future Farmers of America and Minnesota Veterinary Medical Association.

“Most people in the country are far removed from agriculture, and in this exhibit they actually get to see actual live births of calves, sheep and piglets,” said Kevin Haroldson, a retired large-animal veterinarian from northern Minnesota.

Behind Haroldson, a very pregnant cow stood in a round pen surrounded by dozens of spectators cramming together, phones out in anticipation. Veterinarian Michael Hodgman explained the scene over a loudspeaker like a sports commentator. The cow knelt down, and Haroldson put on plastic gloves that extended from fingertip to armpit. Two veterinary students in green overalls joined him with obstetrical or “calf-pulling” chains to help with the delivery.

Less than 10 minutes later, a calf was born, its mother was back on its feet, slightly foaming at the mouth and still dripping placenta.

“The miracle of life,” a mom said.

“It’s horrifying” her kid replied.

“It is horrifying,” she sighed.

‘I have had a butter sculpture, my sister has a butter sculpture’

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Emma Kuball, Princess Kay of the Milky Way, sits for her sculpting by Gerry Kulzer.

In the Dairy Building past the pop-up showrooms for bow fishing equipment and mobile saunas and displays of the Processed Meats Championships of yore, you'll find one of the fair's most iconic sideshows: the butter booth. It's a rotating enclosure where a professional sculptor spends up to eight hours carving butter heads — lifelike busts that rival the Venus de Milo, made from 90-pound blocks of Grade AA butter.

In order for butter heads to survive sweltering August conditions, the booth must be kept at 40 degrees. While everyone else in the humid Dairy Building sweat through their jorts, the two people behind the plexiglass circling slowly like conveyor-belt sushi wore winter gear. And a tiara, because one of them was royalty.

"It's so surreal. It's been a dream of mine forever," said a bundled up and beaming 19-year-old Emma Kuball, who was crowned the 70th annual Princess Kay of the Milky Way the night before the fair began.

Since 1954, the Midwest Dairy Association — which represents dairy farms across a 10-state region — has been anointing a "Princess Kay" to serve as a goodwill ambassador for Minnesota's 1,850 dairy farmers. The year-long position entails traveling throughout Minnesota for public appearances, from classroom visits to trade conventions. To kick off her reign, the princess has her likeness sculpted on the first two days of the fair. The nine other finalists have their heads carved on the days that follow.

Gerry Kulzer of Litchfield, Minn., took over as the fair's official butter sculptor from Linda Christensen, who retired from the role after nearly 50 years. Normally with clay but also with butter, Kulzer sculpts in the classic tradition of Michelangelo and Bernini. He says the hardest part isn't the refrigerated environment; it's nailing the eyes.

"The eyes are the window to the soul," Kulzer said. "If you don't get the eyes right, it seems like the whole face is off."

Former princesses and finalists often keep their butter for years.

"I have had a butter sculpture, my sister has a butter sculpture ... a few aunts, cousins," said Krista Kuzma, a 2005 Princess Kay finalist and daughter of dairy farmers. She now does PR for a firm representing Midwest Dairy.

Because Kuzma had short hair when her butter sculpture was made, she took home three extra buckets-worth of scraps. Her family used them to make cookies, tons of cookies. The bust itself was "such a piece of art," Kuzma said. "I was really kind of connected to that, and I didn't want to let go of it."

So she didn't. Today at her home, "two thirds of a chest freezer is filled with butter sculptures," Kuzma said.

Kuball, also the daughter of dairy farmers, plans to keep her sculpture intact via freezer until her year is up. Then it's curtains for the bulk of it. Her family will have a corn feed (the Midwestern version of a shrimp boil, but with corn) and eat most of the butter, saving only the face.

Klobuchar grew up eating shards of butter heads.

"Back then, they had less respect for hygiene," Klobuchar said. "On the breaks of carving they would gather up the butter chips from the bottom of the floor, and they would put them on Saltines and serve them to the kids — I would just wait for that."

Pizza sticks, cookie buckets and dill pickle everything

The shavings are no longer served to the public, forcing Klobuchar to snack elsewhere. Fortunately there are hundreds of food vendors at the fair. There are the Ba-Sants, a combination bagel slash croissant, or some dill pickle paletas, dill pickle pizza, a dill pickle doughnut or the "Deep Fried Dilly Dog," which is a bratwurst stuffed inside a pickle, all battered and deep-fried.

Klobuchar goes for the cheese curds and stays away from the frozen chocolate covered bananas on a stick, after she chipped her tooth on one the week before going off to college. It required an emergency dental procedure, "but it was still worth it," she said.

Last year, the fair drew vendors and civilians to St. Paul from all 50 states and 28 different countries. Some tour the fair circuit around the country, particularly people who show their prizewinning animals. Others are fixtures of Minnesota's exclusively, like Sweet Martha's Cookie Jar.

Even with vendors debuting wild menu items regularly, Sweet Martha's hypnotizes customers with the simplest of business models: freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. Not massive ones with gourmet flourishes; just petite and classic, served as soon as they're ready in overflowing cups or buckets.

"We say oven hot, made on the spot," said Martha Rossini Olson, the titular Sweet Martha.

Within the 12 days of the 2022 fair, Sweet Martha's grossed \$4.5 million selling just chocolate chip cookies, milk, bottled water and hot coffee. One bite into this perfect cookie — no more than a couple inches large — is enough to understand why.

After Olson and her partners — her husband, Gary, and lifelong friends Neil and Brenda O'Leary — first sold frozen yogurt with chocolate chip cookies as a side treat in 1978, the fair asked them to come back with their cookies the following year. They compared notes of their mothers' chocolate chip cookie recipes to create one of their own. They built an 8x11-foot stand in their backyard where they made 200 little cookies in 12 minutes.

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Jo Olson, owner of Joah's Arc animal events, stands with two of her alpacas.

Once Olson could get a permanent fair location and a big rack oven, production ramped up. A few decades and a couple more fairground locations later, “we can do 44,000 cookies in 12 minutes,” she said. “Most days between the three stands, we’re selling about a million cookies.” Good thing there’s a \$2 all-you-can-drink milk stand nearby.

Olson’s buckets have become an image synonymous with the fair — and perhaps the American urge to take indulgence to the extreme. But Olson says that wasn’t her intention. Customers demanded larger quantity orders, and the bucket was a convenient vehicle. It’s not supposed to be an order for one, but one to share. “I always label it as a take-home bucket,” Olson said.

Of course a fair without indulgence would be sacrilege. Yes, there are stands where attendees can buy fresh apples, kombucha and hummus — and those stands get busy. But in the waning days of summer, when vacations are over, you owe yourself one last fling, like a bacon wrapped waffle dog or pizza on a stick.

“Pizza-on-a-Stick on a stick is one of my dearest friends — he was in my wedding,” Rick Born said of Tino’s Pizza-on-a-Stick founder Tino Lettieri. “He’s actually in the Canadian Soccer Hall of Fame, and his son plays for the Minnesota Wild.”

Born, who lives in the area, is a fair devotee. He wrangles a big group from work to attend opening day together. They get matching shirts for the occasion so they can find one another in the dense fair crowds. This year, about 130 colleagues and their families rolled deep in sherbet-colored tees.

“I grew up working at the Iowa State Fair ... you get the carny blood,” Born said. “I come like four or five times a year.”

After sunset, Born and his group were gathered within earshot of the Leinie Lodge Bandshell Stage, where the fair’s second-most-famous brothers were performing without a cover charge. (The Jonas Brothers would be playing later that week.) “The Bacon Brothers” — actor Kevin Bacon and his brother, Michael — had a packed audience.

“Michael and I have both been married a really long time ... we’re just boring married guys,” the movie star Bacon told the crowd between songs. He introduced their next song, one about “making things the best they could possibly be.”

It could be the fair’s anthem; a reminder that when life gives you lemons, get a jumbo lemonade and fried cheese on a stick.