

Avast, ye cheeseheads!



Kristyna Wentz-Graff

Bill Parry grabs a kiss from his wife-to-be, Sarah Kaufmann, as they prepare for their pirate wedding. The couple met on an airplane while Kaufmann was working on a cheese sculpture of the USS Ronald Reagan and Parry noticed her blueprints.

'Pirate wedding' to unite cheese sculptor, Navy retiree

By Karen Herzog of the Journal Sentinel

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Kristyna Wentz-Graff

Sarah Kaufmann puts the final touches on a cheese Jolly Roger.



Not many brides carve a skull-and-crossbones cheese sculpture for their nuptials, or tie the knot in pirate garb alongside a 32-foot armored vessel within hailing distance of Lake Michigan.

But professional cheese sculptor Sarah Kaufmann - a.k.a. The Cheese Lady - would not settle for anything less than a playfully elaborate backdrop for her wedding Saturday afternoon to retired U.S. Navy Cmdr. Bill Parry, in her hometown port of Manitowoc.

Don't be surprised if a swashbuckling Capt. Jack Sparrow boards the matrimonial vessel loaded with duct-tape cannonballs, grabs the Jolly Roger cheese sculpture and the pirate bride, and sails for Sheboygan with Fourth of July fireworks bursting in air.

Pirate puns have been flying for months.

"Our love is anchored in cheese," quipped Kaufmann, 57.

Avast, ye mateys, it's true, according to the 67-year-old groom.

The couple met on an airplane five summers ago. She was heading to San Diego to present a six-foot-long cheese carving of the USS Ronald Reagan at the ship's home-porting ceremony, and he was returning to San Diego from Navy business in Washington.

Parry was buckled into his seat, ready for takeoff, "and along comes Sarah, and sits down beside me," he recalled. "She was looking at a blueprint of an aircraft carrier, and I asked what she was doing. I said I was with the Navy, and she explained that she was studying the aircraft carrier because she had sculpted it in cheese for Sargento, which does business with the Navy."

The retired military commander assumed he knew more about the aircraft carrier than the cheese sculptor sitting beside him. He was wrong.

"She knew everything about it, and I was taken aback," Parry recalled.

He asked her out for dinner. And they hit it off.

They maintained a long-distance relationship for a few years before she moved to his home port of San Diego, and they began discussing marriage. This is the second for both.

A family project

To proclaim their "love anchored in cheese" theme, the couple are flying from the ship's yardarm a yellow swallowtail flag with a Navy blue anchor and painted holes to identify it as cheese.

The ship, aptly named the MV (Matrimonial Vessel) Cheese Lady, also will fly the Jolly Roger.

Most of the Hollywood-esque wedding set was created by the bride's family.

Fabricated on a hay wagon borrowed from Kaufmann's sister's Manitowoc farmette, the MV Cheese Lady was designed and built by the bride's brother, Tom Kaufmann, a professional carpenter. It features three fake cannons that fire duct-tape cannonballs; a Cheese Lady papier-mâché mermaid, created by the bride's sister, Linda Miller; and a ship's wheel crafted by the bride's ironsmith brother, Paul Kaufmann, from a wooden Model T wheel, vintage brass crown hubcap and brass bolts.

The wedding rings resemble cheese - bands of gold with cheese dimples and holes.

Attendants for the ceremony are to be chosen from among the 80 guests, moments before vows are exchanged. Guests were to compete for "pirate points" in games the night before the wedding. Games included Dead Man's Chest (a game of memorizing and recalling items in a treasure chest), Nautical Numskull (a quiz of nautical terms) and Ahoy Matey (guests match descriptions of each other to get acquainted).

The final test is a pirate costume contest preceding the wedding.

The groom's brother Tom Parry is to serve as ship's captain and will perform the wedding ceremony. Guests were invited via cheese-carving illustrated messages sent in glass bottles. Pirate garb was the requested attire.

Guests in non-pirate wear may have to walk the plank.

'Everyone's a pirate'

Clearly, the bride has experience staging elaborate events.

In addition to being a professional cheese carver - carving and promoting hundreds of cheese commissions across the United States since 1996 - Sarah Kaufmann has been creative director for the Wisconsin dairy industry, and manager of creative services for Jungle Jim's International Market in Fairfield, Ohio.

(To see some of Kaufmann's cheese sculptures, visit www.sarahcheeselady.com.)

The bridal cheese sculpture started as 20 pounds of golden Wisconsin cheddar. The white skull and crossbones are white inlaid Monterey Jack. Golden cheddar hearts are set in the eye sockets of the love-struck skull, complete with a tricorn cheddar pirate hat.

"My mom is cutting yellow and white hearts out of cheese to sprinkle around the sculpture for the guests to nibble," Kaufmann added.

If you're wondering about the retired naval commander shedding his military dress uniform for a white-ruffled blouse, black tights and sea boots, black and gold vest, gold sash and tricorn pirate hat with a feather, rest assured: He also plans to wear his naval sword.

Parry retired from active duty in 1988 after serving 20 years spanning four ships. He spent another 20 years working for Military Sealift Command, a branch within the Navy that operates logistics ships.

"I know pirates are a shifty lot," Parry said with a chuckle. "But once you're off land, everyone's a pirate. My dress uniform disappeared the day I retired from the Navy."