



a festival for all ages

By Lori B. Donofrio-Galley

Since 1950, visitors to the Kutztown Folk Festival reminisce about their “firsts” at the oldest continuously operating folklife festival in America...their first funnel cake, their first Opening Day, their first taste of the famous ox roast sandwich, their first obsession with a stunning quilt up for auction that they couldn’t pass on bidding, or their first visit to the Hoedown Stage to watch four generations of Lester Miller Family dancers—some as young as two years old!

These and many other firsts, for seventy-four years, have drawn generations of families, artists, musicians, craftsmen, quilters, entertainers, scholars, and purveyors of iconic food and food experiences to a festival recognized nationally for its authentic Pennsylvania German culture. In fact, this year, *USA TODAY 10BEST* ranked the Kutztown Folk Festival #3 in the category of Best Cultural Festival.

Located at the Kutztown Fairgrounds, 450 Wentz Street, the nine-day event will run this year from June 29 through July 7, 2024. Heather Zimmerman, Festival





Director, remarks, “We are so excited to approach our 74th Kutztown Folk Festival this June. This celebration of our PA Dutch culture brings friends and families from all over to enjoy our authentic foods, unique culture and craftsmen, lively entertainers, and handcrafted quilts. We invite everyone to come join us this year for a festival full of memories to be made.”

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The literal fabric of the festival has been pieced by generations of families invested year after year in celebrating traditions they remember fondly and want to share. “For a lot of the people—it is nostalgia—they want to see what they saw as kids,” noted Craig Koller, Quilt Auction emcee. Kay Bennecoff, host of BCTV’s *Your Berks Craftsmen*, notes, “Of course, to the people in Berks County, it is tradition. Kids grew up with it—now those kids, who are older, bring their kids and grandkids back to see it.”

The festival used to be a focus of the granges and 4-H Clubs. In fact, Lester Miller, renowned Hoedown Caller, and part of the “First Family of the Festival,” according to Dave Kline, award-winning singer-songwriter, explained that a dance competition among the granges and 4-H Clubs in the early years was the origin of the Hoedown Stage. To commemorate the Lester Miller family tradition, the Lester Miller Family Stage was dedicated in 2023.

A History Trail featuring local people who have supported and shaped the decades-long development of the festival was unveiled in 2023. Patrick Donmoyer, Director

of the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, designs the panels that pay tribute; new ones will be unveiled this June.

As inspirational as the festival founders and sustainers are the quilts that will be auctioned on Saturday, July 6, 2024, in the world-famous Quilt Barn. Cyndi Hershey, Quilt Education and Development Director, notes “I am planning to post “My Inspiration” cards around the Quilt Barn, and I’ve asked contributing quilters to send me their thoughts on what inspires them in their quilting journey.” She also shares that demonstrations of hand-quilting will continue, and, new this year, visitors will see demonstrations of machine-piecing, applique, and quilting. Education, after all, is an essential part of the Quilt Barn experience. “We offered our first quilt classes this winter with a variety of topics at the Kutztown Historical Society. Attendees seemed very engaged and offered positive feedback. We hope to offer classes in the fall and in other locations.” Anyone who wants to volunteer in the Quilt Barn can contact Cyndi directly at her-shey@kutztownfestival.com.

“The PA Germans were among the original settlers of this area—we need to remember not only the heritage, but also the contributions of the PA German culture,” observes Rev. Dr. Harry L. Serio.

Visit <https://www.kutztownfestival.com/> to purchase your advance tickets and to explore schedules, merchandise, vendors, and entertainment schedules.

