Humor, like olives or pickled herring, is a matter of personal taste. Despite my best efforts, my wife remains numb to the comic genius that is the Three Stooges. I, on the other hand, find Desperate Housewives to be about as funny as scraping my knuckles on a cheese grater. Less clear, though, is the extent to which humor is culturally specific. On one hand, a pie in the face or a soccer ball to the groin is universally acknowledged as a paradigm of rib-tickling hilarity. On the other, the gangly antics and grotesque mugging of the young Jerry Lewis appear to be a form of drollery that only the French are equipped to appreciate (they awarded him their Legion of Honor in 2006). Similarly, the physical humor, ribald wit, and jocular misunderstandings of Shakespeare continue to send audiences into stitches four hundred years after his plays were written. But in the twenty-first century, how many of us concur with the First Folio in classifying The Merchant of Venice as a “comedy”?

To explore these meaty questions, I spent several weeks collecting and reading hundreds of jokes (specifically food-related ones) from the early and late modern eras—that is, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and again from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From those jokes, I culled what I consider to be the top four from each era, which I present below. I leave it to you, dear reader, to determine whether the food jokes from days of yore are as funny as those of more recent conception.

There was a woman which could never make breade that would please her husbande. One time strippying herselfe naked, and washing her selfe cleane all her body over, shee made dough and moulded it upon a stoole, and when she was wearie, she forgat herself and sat downe upon the stoole and the dough cleaved to her buttockes. Anon shee arose and sought for it, and her husband asked her what shee looked for, and she sayd, “For the loafe which I have made for thine own tooth.” “Mary,” quoth hee, “it sticketh to thy buttockes,” and then the cleanly huswife remembred hir self.

—The Schoolemaster, Thomas Twyne, 1576

Many clowns being eating of a posset together, one of them burned his chaps for greediness, with pain whereof he let fly a fart; “Go thy ways,” said he, “thou art the happiest of all thy fellows, for hadst thou still remained within, thou wouldest have been most miserably scalded.”

—Pasquils Jestes Mixed with Mother Bunches Merriments, 1609

A Man Walketh into a Bar

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A poor gentleman had a turkey-pye very often served to his table; a serving-man being asked to carry it in again, neglected it; whereupon his master calling for it, and asking why he did not bring it in: he reply’d, “It hath been here so often, I thought by this time, it could have found the way in alone.”

—Pasquils Jestes Mixed with Mother Bunches Merriments, 1609

A Gentleman ordered a crane for supper; but his cook having a sweetheart in a longing condition, cut off a leg and sent her; so the one-legged crane was set on the table, which the Gentleman seeing, was enraged at his cook; but he being an arch wag, readily he told the gentleman, that cranes had but one leg and avow’d it with such confidence, that he gain’d upon his wise masters belief; but he resolving to observe it as he was walking in the fields one frosty morning, he saw a flock of cranes, and sending for his cook, they held up one of their legs under their wings, as is the custom of those birds in the cool weather; “So,” says his cook, “I hope your Worship is satisfied that they have but one leg.” But the Gentleman going pretty near to them, cries “Cush!”, and frightened them up, whereupon both legs appeared; “Look,” says the Gentleman, “they have now two legs.” “Oh,” says the cook, “if you had cried ‘cush’ to that in the dish, it would have had two legs too.”

—Humphrey Crouch, England’s Jests Refin’d and Improv’d, 1693

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While visiting his brother-in-law’s farm, a man notices a three-legged pig, and asks what happened to him. The farmer explains, “He’s a special pig. Once I was ploughing the field and the tractor rolled over and pinned me to the ground, and that pig ran to the house and got my wife and brought her to me and saved my life. Another time a fire started in the kitchen and the pig made so much noise he woke us up
and saved us all.” “But how did he lose his leg?” the man asks. “Well,” says the farmer, “a special pig like that you don’t eat all at once.”

A man walks into a diner, sits up at the counter, and orders a hamburger. The cook reaches into a container of ground beef and pulls out a wad of meat. He slaps the wad into his bare armpit and flattens it by flapping his arm three or four times. The man turns to the patron on his right and says: “Oh my God! That’s the grossest thing I’ve ever seen!” The other customer replies: “Hell, that’s nothing. You should come here in the morning when he’s making donuts!”

A man and his girlfriend are out to dinner one night. The waiter tells them the special is chicken amandine and fresh fish. “The chicken sounds good; I’ll have that,” the woman says. The waiter nods. “And the vegetable?” he asks. “Oh,” she replies, “he’ll have the fish.”

With a wry smile, the Buddhist monk gives his order to the hot dog vendor: “Make me one with everything!” The vendor chuckles appreciatively, hands the monk his food, and turns to his next customer. “What about my change?” says the monk, to which the vendor replies, “Change must come from within.”