WHIMSICAL GERMAN SURNAMES

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All European languages, probably, have some family names that are a bit comical in effect. Some examples:

French: LESUEUR sweat, BOILEAU drink water
Hungarian: CUKOR sugar, LISZT flour
Czech: KRUTA turkey
Ukrainian: GROMYKO noisy
Russian: TOLSTOY fat
Dutch: DE GIER vulture

English: GOLIGHTLY, CAKEBREAD, PIGG, HOGG, BUGG, SHAKESPEARE, WAGSTAFF
Italian: BEVILACQUA drink water, MANGIAPANE eat bread, MANGIAVACCA eat cow, MAZZAPICA kill magpie, QUATTROCCHI four eyes

Most family names were derived from patronyms, place names, occupational names, and sobriquets or nicknames. Appellations of the last type are often complimentary: GOODFELLOW, BIEDERMAN (upright man) - but these are no fun. Very often they were applied in jest, at the expense of someone who was thought to look or act like some animal, or had a strange habit, such as avoiding alcoholic drink, or had a favorite expression (German BEYGOTT, HERRGOTT, WISSGOTT). The humor may be directed at downright antisocial behavior; the original targets of the last two English names above might have been guys of an irascible, threatening nature, but they might also have been exhibitionists, a notion that I favor: the islanders who later gave us the limerick were quite capable of this sort of humor. As the reader will already have noted, a good many famous persons were not immune from inheriting these whimsical names.

It is German speakers who seem to have had the greatest penchant for adopting these comical, not always complimentary family names. Practically the whole dictionary appears. Among attitudinally neutral names, there are all the seasons of the year, and every day of the week except maybe Tuesday: Sunday is the most popular, with Friday a strong second ("Dank sei Gott, 's ist Freitag!"). The list that follows was compiled without putting much effort into it. If your name has a seriously pejorative meaning, please don't take it too seriously - quite a few of these names are considered to have been corrupted over the years from the original form to a word that has an altogether different meaning in modern German. Alas, this is the case with my favorite German surname, KATZENELLENBOGEN cat's elbow, which is derived from a place name that was originally the Celtic tribal name Chattimelibochi of unknown meaning.

My sources have been German and American telephone directories, newspapers and onomasticians. This article was created from the Dictionary of 1988).
newspapers and other ephemera, and the publications of various
onomastics. Most of what appears to be scholarship in the present
article was cribbed from Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges’s marvelous A
Dictionary of Surnames (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press,
1988).

A HL eel
ANGSTWURM fright worm
BAUCH belly
BEYGOTT by God
BLEIBIMHAUS stay at home
BUTTERBRODT bread and butter
DONNERSTAG Thursday
DREYFUS three foot
EIDAM son-in-law
FEIGE fig (cowardly)
FEYERABEND quitting time
FICKER fucker
FINGERHUT thimble
FLECK spot
FLIEGE housefly
FREITAG Friday
FROESCHLE froggie
FRUHAUP up early
FRUHLING spring
GNADE mercy
GOTT God
GOTTSCHALK God’s rascal
GROSSKOPF big head
HANDSCHUH glove
HERBST autumn
HERRGOTT Lord God
HUFNAGEL horseshoe nail
HUNDETWASSER hundred waters
IGEL hedgehog
KAFER beetle
KASEBIER cheese beer
KATZENELLENBOGEN cat’s elbows
KERAUS clean out
KNOBLAUCH garlic
KRATZER scratcher
KREBS crab
KUCKUCK cuckoo
KUSMAUL kiss mouth
LANGHALS long neck
LIEBESKIND love child
LUSTGARTEN pleasure garden
MAUS mouse
MITTWOCH Wednesday
MONTAG Monday
MORGENSCHWEISS morning sweat
NACKTGEBOREN born naked
PFLUGHAUPT plow head
PILZ mushroom
QUADPLIEG nasty fly
REHPUSS deerfoot
ROSWAENGE rosy cheek
ROTBUSS red foot
RUSSWORM soot worm (a blacksmith)
SAFT juice
SALPETER saltpeter
SALZ salt
SAMMET velvet
SAMSTAG Saturday
SCHADE what a pity
SCHADEL skull
SCHAAF,SCHAF,SCHAFF sheep
SCHALK rascal
SCHARFSPITZ sharp point
SCHAUFFEL shovel
SCHALM foam
SCHMAML footstool
SCHERTZ joke
SCHIEU shyness
SCHMIMELPFENNIG moldy penny (miser)
SCHMALZ lard
SCHOCK shock
SCHOLL clod
SCHÖN beautiful
SCHRECK fright
SCHWAMM sponge, fungus
SCHWEINFEST pig festival
SEEHASE sea hare (the lumpfish)
SENF mustard
SOMMER summer
SONNABEND Saturday
SONNTAG Sunday
TAUSENTEUFEL thousand devils
TEUFEL devil
TRINKAUS drink up
TRUMP trump, Jew’s harp
UNGERHÜER monster
UNREIN unclean
WALFISCH whale
WANDBRODT soft bread
WINTER winter
WISSGOTT God knows
ZICKPOOSE goat foot
ZIPFEL tip, point
ZITTERBARTH tremble beard