

THE MOREISH MAGIC OF MAGGI

Beloved for its savoury richness, Maggi is a global phenomenon. Serena Coady talks to the people who consider it their secret ingredient

Illustration:
Wendy Wong



The pierogies – Polish dumplings – look sacred. Plucked from the pot and drenched in butter, steam rises gently from the soft pile. The colourful vegetables of the pad see mao pull focus among

thick, silky sheets of noodle engorged with a rich soy sauce. The jollof rice, served in that same bowl all your aunties own, radiates smokiness with its deep red hues. These umami-rich dishes originate from three different cultures, but each evokes the same primal response: 'I care not if I stinge the roof of my mouth, I dine now.' But what else ties these dishes together? A 19th-century milling professional from Switzerland, that's who.

In the late 1800s, Julius Maggi was approached by the Swiss government to develop a solution to malnutrition in the working population. More women were being recruited into factory work and had little time to prepare nourishing meals for their families. Maggi believed that pulses were a nutritious way forward, so he spent two years developing pea and bean flours. In 1886, he released a concentrated, flavour-enhancing liquid bouillon. Maggi Witze, or Maggi liquid seasoning, was a hit. By 1888, Maggi had established company branches in Italy, Germany, France, the UK, and the US.

The inky brown sauce is still a dinner table fixture in millions of hungry households. From soupy ramen to a Sunday-saving Bloody Mary, Maggi seasoning can be added as a last-ditch effort to transform a bland dish or simply used as a cheap way to add savoury richness. In the UK, 100ml bottles of Maggi liquid seasoning cost a mere £1 (but devotees might find

the one-litre bottles to be more appropriate).

Little drops of water make the mighty ocean, and little drops of Maggi make a mighty meal. You don't need much. While it's similar to soy sauce in colour, consistency and taste, you only need one sniff to notice that Maggi seasoning has deeper, more aromatic notes.

Despite its practical, government-mandated Swiss origins, Maggi seasoning transcends culture. Visit any continent and you won't need to look far for the ubiquitous yellow and red bell-shaped bottle, a design that has remained largely unchanged for the past 132 years. According to Nestlé, Maggi's largest markets are India, Brazil, Germany, the Middle East, and Western Africa. This is attributed to the company's success in localising products in accordance with the flavour profiles and economic requirements of different countries.

Julio Maggi, the version available in Spain and Mexico, has a milder taste and a motor oil-like consistency. The Filipino variation tastes like garlic. In Western Africa and in regions of the Middle East, the seasoning is mainly sold in cube form.

While the seasoning is quietly famous for helping meals reach a savoury crescendo, it's absent from mainstream food culture. It's seldom referenced by chefs in cookbooks, or in online recipes drowning in SEO-friendly blogger backstories. And a three-letter word might be to blame.

Maggi seasoning's core ingredients are sugar, salt, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, and MSG. In the same way restaurants fall over themselves



to declare that they are 'MSG-free' – the stickers in shop windows, the black letters on takeaway menus – chefs rarely admit to using a seasoning loaded with MSG, even though the negative health effects of MSG have been disproven. But in the private homes of sodium apologists around the world, Maggi seasoning is still a secret weapon.

Karolina Klesta runs Polish Foodies, a blog featuring traditional recipes from her home country. Known as Maggi Przyprawa, the seasoning is very popular in Poland. Klesta's mother and grandmother used to add a dash to Polish meals including pierogi ruskie, potato-filled dumplings, and rosoł, a chicken noodle soup. 'Maggi is salty, so it definitely makes

the dish more expressive. Like the lovage we also use, Maggi is very aromatic,' says Klesta.

The lovage Klesta refers to is an ancient plant used in herbal medicine and European cuisine. While Maggi seasoning does not contain lovage, it has a similar taste and aroma. In some countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, lovage has become colloquially known as 'Maggiplant'.

These days, Klesta uses the childhood staple sparingly. 'I don't use Maggi that often because it contains preservatives. I try to cook as simply as possible, with herbs and natural ingredients only. When I was a kid, we used Maggi almost every day,' says Klesta.

The seasoning is popular in other parts of Europe, including Switzerland, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Ukraine. Greg Lubczenko, a Ukrainian-Australian baking enthusiast, cites the seasoning as 'the only acceptable condiment for my grandmother's chicken soup'. For Lubczenko, the seasoning gets better with age. 'Everyone in the family has a bottle lurking in their pantry – probably from

the 1990s – for the sole purpose of adding it to rosoł, Ukrainian chicken noodle soup. One uncle is also known to douse his varenyky, dumplings filled with potato and cabbage, in the seasoning,' he says.

Many Maggi lovers, Europeans and non-Europeans alike, treat the French version as if it were divine nectar. Michelin-starred chef Pierre Koffmann even considers Maggi seasoning to be one of his go-to ingredients. Used to add depth to soups à l'oignon, French onion soup, and bouef bourguignon, the signature red wine beef stew, Arôme is the most celebrated and most expensive of the Maggi liquid seasonings.

In Western Africa, Maggi seasoning is more affordable. In Nigeria, 30 million Maggi cubes are sold each day. Due to the country's high rates of maternal and juvenile anaemia, Maggi released iron-fortified cubes, which have reached 20 million households.

Nigeria-born immigrant Ruémú works between London and Milan as a professional chef. The foil-wrapped cubes were a building block for her relationship with food and continue to spark a kind of nostalgia for her. As a child, Maggi was in almost every meal she ate, particularly in her mother's and aunties' party jollof, a spicy tomato and pepper-based rice. 'I can always tell when there is Maggi seasoning in a dish because it just tastes like home. Even if I don't use it for a while, my taste buds will forever be familiar with it. It's a place of comfort for my palate,' says Ruémú.

Ruémú has noticed a lot of recent discourse surrounding commercial seasonings, with a particular focus on Maggi being the most popular in Nigerian homes. The seasoning

defined many of the meals she ate as a child, however her culinary training has led her to favour fresh ingredients. 'Fresh homemade seasoning tends to be better because you know exactly what is going into your food. I prefer not to use Maggi seasoning, but this is mainly because I enjoy making my own seasoning and spice mixes. However, I understand how convenient using Maggi cubes, or any of its other seasonings, can be.'

While Maggi cubes bring flavour, they also bring sodium. Lots of it. In Nigeria, children in urban areas consume more than the adult recommended intake of salt, so it's understandable that individuals like Ruémú are turning to healthier alternatives. While creating homemade stock cubes is her latest 'obsession', she can't stay away from Maggi entirely. 'I occasionally find myself in the presence of Maggi seasoning as many of my West African and Asian friends who grew up with it request that I use it when cooking for them.'

Maggi seasoning is widely used in Asian cuisine. In Vietnam, it's drizzled on top of bánh mì, crunchy baguettes filled with meat and pickles. In Thailand, it's used interchangeably with Golden Mountain sauce to add meaty depth to pad kee mao, chili-basil drunken noodles.

In the Philippines, the well-loved seasoning is known as Savor. Bolek Vitangool, a Filipino living in Melbourne, says: 'The seasoning reminds me of childhood. My siblings and I called it our 'everything sauce' because it would complement all of our family's favourite dishes. Back home, it would be in every Filipino household.'

Across the Sulu Sea, Maggi seasoning is used in a variety of tasty Indonesian-Malay sate meals. Jerald Kang, a personal trainer based in Kuala Lumpur, recognises Maggi liquid as the

powerhouse of any umami dish. 'In Malaysia, we use it with pan-fried chicken, maggi goreng, nasi goreng, and many other dishes. We use it in small volumes, adding just a few drops. It's delicious and adds great flavour to most foods. We even put it in family burgers, our street burgers,' says Kang.

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aggi seasoning is a cross-cultural kitchen staple for Zartina Dhillon, a home cook who creates recipes for Zart's Kitchen.

'I learnt cooking from my mother who was always creating something Indian, Chinese or European in the kitchen. In Hong Kong, I grew up adding Maggi seasoning to soups and sauces,' says Dhillon. She lives in London now and considers the seasoning to be her secret ingredient. She uses it to add 'beefy' flavour to French onion soup and instant ramen, and to her Indian family's traditional recipes for 'extra umami' flavours. The seasoning even plays a part at Christmas time, with Dhillon using it to taste the 'masala-injected' turkey.

To wade into the inky waters of Maggi, start small. Whisk it into your morning eggs, or layer a few drops into a stir-fry. You could send a bottle to a university student you know to lift their spirits – perhaps their first unchaperoned foray into cooking isn't going too well. The seasoning might become the most-cherished ingredient, as it has for millions of people around the world. For Mexicans to Malay sates, Filipinos to the French, Maggi liquid seasoning is a certified umami-amplifier, and a taste of home.

A BOTTLED HISTORY OF MAGGI

1884
The Swiss entrepreneur, Julius Maggi, sets out to produce supplements and meal solutions for an undernourished population

1886
Julius launches some of the world's first instant soups. Maggi liquid bouillon and cubes follow shortly afterwards

1900
Julius has now registered variations of the Maggi name in various typefaces and meal solutions in different countries

1947
Nestlé acquires the Maggi brand

2021
Maggi launches a new range of concentrated seasoning pastes under the name Maggi Marketplace