

## **The Ubiquitous Maggi Cube**

**Essay 1:** The Birth of Maggi, the Cube: Industrial Time, Women's Labour, and the Invention of Convenience

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In 2023, the pan-African magazine, Jeune Afrique, published an article titled: [How Maggi Colonised African Plates](#). If colonisation is defined as the act of “moving into and living in (a place) as a new type of plant or animal”, and we will add in this instance, as a new seasoning method, then Maggi cube did exactly that, it that came from distant shores. As Jeune Afrique subtitled: “Imported by colonialists, the famous salted brick has become an essential ingredient in recipes across the continent”.

Indeed, it would appear that you can’t move about many markets in Côte d’Ivoire (and other African countries) or many kitchens without coming face-to-face with this cube that has become synonymous with African cuisine.

But before Maggi, the cube, became this unquestioned inhabitant of African kitchens, it lived an entirely different life in the smoke, noise, and exhaustion of Europe’s industrial revolution. And it is important that this history is remembered, especially as today, this cube is what makes every woman a star, and which, as the [advert](#) would have us believe, is even transmitted from mothers to daughters. High claims indeed, and before we get swept away into it, let’s understand the journey of this cube, and its ubiquitousness.

### **Switzerland – 1880s: The Industrial Revolution and the birth of “fast food”**

The Industrial Revolution, which started in Great Britain in 1760, had spread to continental Europe by 1840. In late 19th-century Switzerland, industrialisation was remaking everything: work hours, family rhythms, nutrition, even the meaning of “home.”

“As machines replaced individual labour and burgeoning industries needed coal, women became part of the growing working classes that laboured in mines and mills.”

German philosopher Friedrich Engels will later argue, the Industrial Revolution made workers worse off, but especially women workers, who, because they were considered weak and less skilled than men, were economically exploited. In his book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels writes:

“I know several women, widows with children, who have trouble enough to earn eight to nine shillings a week; and that they and their families cannot live decently upon that sum, everyone must admit who knows the price of the barest necessities of life in England.

It wasn’t only in England that women were exploited; everywhere in Europe, women suffered the same fate. On top of working long hours – 80 hours-week – for pittance outside

the home, they also had to return home and do more labour, this one unpaid. It goes without saying that the time needed to make nutritious meals could no longer be afforded.

It is within this landscape that we encounter Julius Michael Johannes Maggi.

Julius Michael Johannes Maggi was a Swiss entrepreneur who was born in 1846. In 1869, he inherited his father's hammer mill, and by 1886, he'd invented the "Maggi seasoning" – an acid-hydrolysed vegetable protein seasoning (or liquid seasoning). The flavouring was intended to spice up overly bland broths and insipid soups and most importantly, to save time in the kitchen. As Julius Maggi himself explained, *"This industrialization of cooking allows the worker to obtain substantial and cheap food immediately, by simply heating it."*

And this is why, dear reader, in case it hasn't been made obvious, that feminism matters. For while one can see the goodwill of factory inspectors like Fridolin Schuler speaking out against the health risks faced by the poorer members of society, the solution was to turn to an industrial to come up with a quick solution as opposed to doing the heavy work of domestic responsibility redistribution. Or perhaps, the thinking that required could not be dealt with when capitalism was screaming so loud, and it could somewhat be satiated by exploitative women's labour. Thus, Julius Maggi's dream "of creating food products that would become as ubiquitous as salt and pepper, ... and a brand that no-one would ever forget" was fulfilled.

### **How the cube travelled: Colonial trade routes and the seduction of "modern taste"**

If the cube had stayed in Switzerland, I'm sure that it would have remained a footnote at best in European food history. After all, it would be a hard feat to come across huge, bright posters on European streets heralding women being a star for using Maggi cube or even being given a Maggi cube on their wedding day by their mothers. But the power of dreams, and also, while Julius Maggi was launching his seasoned flavouring in 1886, the Berlin Conference had acted on Feb 26, 1885, an agreement regulating European colonisation and trade in Africa.

By the 1920s and 30s, bouillon cubes were being actively marketed across colonies. Not simply as flavour enhancers, but as *symbols of civilisation*. Adverts promised that "modern women" used cubes. Posters showed tidy kitchens, clean aprons, Europeanised aesthetics. African kitchens, and African women were subtly shown to be backward and unhygienic.

The cultural restructuring through the civilising mission was well underway with its message of: “Your traditions are inefficient. Our way is better.”

### **A question of taste, or a question of power?**

As I have been thinking about Maggi cube and its omnipresence in our cuisine, I have wondered why it was so quickly adopted, why we ended up loving it so much. Was it because it was tastier? And then I wondered if the way in which I was framing my questions was not misleading. Taste is not neutral. Taste can also be, and actually is, political history on the tongue. So, what is that politics?

Essay 2 will explore that!!!