Butterfat Test Encyclopedia Article

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Contents

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The late 1800s and early 1900s saw many advances in the dairying industry. One such development was the butterfat test invented by American Stephen M. Babcock (1843-1931) in 1890 and marketed in 1891. Before Babcock invented the test, dairy farmers had to wait for the cream to rise in a container of milk to estimate its percentage of butterfat. This method was slow and inaccurate. The Babcock test employed a combination of acid, heat and centrifugal force to quickly precipitate a measurable amount of butterfat. Since many farmers were not scientifically qualified to conduct the tests themselves, they usually had it done by an expert for a small fee. Dairy farmers ultimately profited from the test because they could learn which cows gave high-fat milk and what farming methods and environmental conditions helped induce high-fat milk production. Additionally, butter manufacturers could make advance payments to farmers who knew the percentage of butterfat that their cows would produce. The Babcock test, which removed the element of chance in the production of butterfat, eventually led to the organization of dairying associations in Wisconsin, New York and other dairying regions. The presence of such associations and testing methods led to standardization in dairy production. Mechanization and improved transportation, especially the railroads, moved butter and cheese making from the farm to the factory.