



US011185191B2

(12) **United States Patent**
Laub

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 11,185,191 B2**

(45) **Date of Patent:** **Nov. 30, 2021**

(54) **MODULAR FOOD HOLDING SYSTEM**

USPC 219/394, 402
See application file for complete search history.

(71) Applicant: **PRINCE CASTLE LLC**, Carol
Stream, IL (US)

(72) Inventor: **Christine Suen Laub**, Roselle, IL (US)

(73) Assignee: **Marmon Foodservice Technologies,
Inc.**, Osseo, MN (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this
patent is extended or adjusted under 35
U.S.C. 154(b) by 0 days.

(56)

References Cited

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

D63,818 S	1/1924	Curtiss
3,073,938 A	1/1963	Turner
D243,362 S	2/1977	Shumrak et al.
4,349,147 A	9/1982	Jensen

(Continued)

FOREIGN PATENT DOCUMENTS

AU	2009290591 B2	10/2015
CN	202565936 U	12/2012

(Continued)

(21) Appl. No.: **15/160,748**

(22) Filed: **May 20, 2016**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2017/0332842 A1 Nov. 23, 2017

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

(51) **Int. Cl.**

A47J 39/00	(2006.01)
A47F 10/06	(2006.01)
H05K 5/02	(2006.01)
H05K 7/02	(2006.01)
A47B 87/02	(2006.01)
A47B 71/00	(2006.01)
A47B 77/08	(2006.01)
A47F 7/00	(2006.01)

www.dictionary.com, definition of port (4 of 6), entry 4a. (Year:
2020).*

(Continued)

Primary Examiner — Jeffrey A Shapiro

(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Andrus Intellectual
Property Law, LLP

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **A47J 39/006** (2013.01); **A47F 10/06**
(2013.01); **H05K 5/0217** (2013.01); **H05K**
7/023 (2013.01); **A47B 71/00** (2013.01); **A47B**
77/08 (2013.01); **A47B 87/0276** (2013.01);
A47F 7/0071 (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

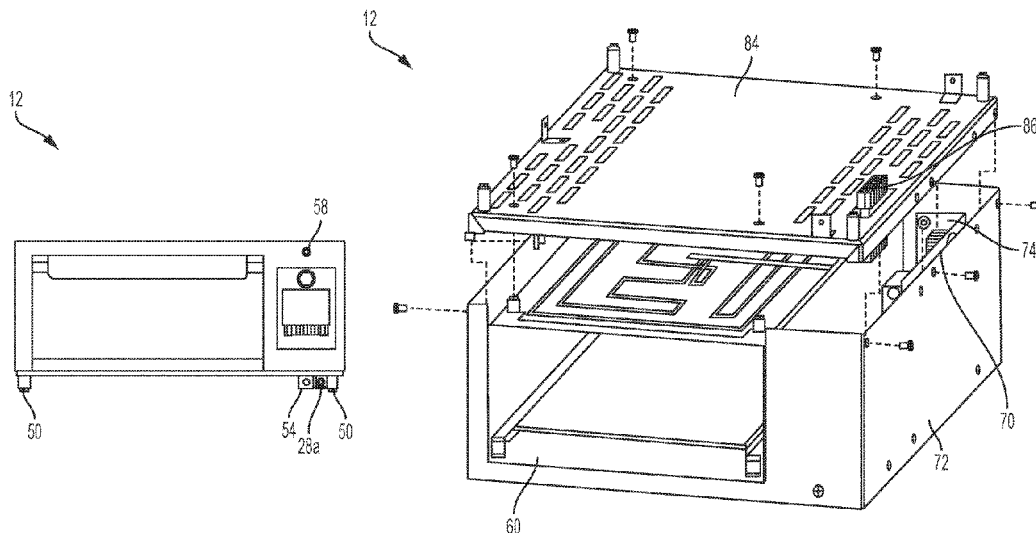
CPC **A47J 39/02**; **A47J 39/006**; **H05K 7/023**;
H05K 5/0217; **A47F 10/06**; **A47F 7/0071**;
A47B 77/08; **A47B 71/00**; **A47B**
87/0276; **G05B 2219/25338**; **G05B**
19/042

(57)

ABSTRACT

A modular food holding system includes a plurality of individual modularized food holding chambers, each of the plurality of food holding chambers being physically and communicatively removably connected to one another. Each of the food holding chambers includes a food holding cavity and at least one of a heating element and/or a cooling element for heating or cooling the food holding cavity. A chamber base is physically and communicatively removably

(Continued)



connected to one of the food holding chambers and operation of at least one food holding chamber is controlled by the chamber base.

20 Claims, 23 Drawing Sheets

(56)

References Cited

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

4,686,506	A	*	8/1987	Farago	G06F 13/38 341/100
4,760,921	A		8/1988	Licari	
4,782,245	A	*	11/1988	Henry	G06F 13/409 307/112
4,864,274	A		9/1989	Black	
5,253,564	A		10/1993	Rosenbrock et al.	
D341,054	S		11/1993	Maputol	
D364,530	S		11/1995	Robards, Jr. et al.	
D369,269	S		4/1996	Labadia Del Fresno	
5,542,206	A		8/1996	Lisch	
5,579,952	A		12/1996	Fiedler et al.	
5,580,279	A	*	12/1996	Belopolsky	H01R 13/6625 439/620.09
5,628,653	A	*	5/1997	Haas	H01R 31/005 439/607.04
5,671,856	A		9/1997	Lisch	
5,699,925	A		12/1997	Petruzzi	
5,724,886	A		3/1998	Ewald et al.	
5,729,431	A	*	3/1998	Marwah	G06F 1/1601 257/713
5,746,114	A		5/1998	Harris	
5,783,803	A		7/1998	Robards, Jr.	
5,828,905	A	*	10/1998	Rao	G06F 3/002 710/63
5,900,173	A		5/1999	Robards, Jr.	
6,116,154	A		9/2000	Vaseloff	
D434,265	S		11/2000	Tatlow	
6,175,099	B1		1/2001	Shei et al.	
6,198,084	B1		3/2001	Kim	
6,262,394	B1		7/2001	Shei et al.	
6,412,403	B1		7/2002	Veltrop	
6,459,175	B1	*	10/2002	Potega	B60L 11/185 307/132 M
6,545,587	B1		4/2003	Hatakeyama et al.	
6,587,739	B1		7/2003	Abrams et al.	
6,637,322	B2		10/2003	Veltrop	
6,658,994	B1		12/2003	An	
6,774,347	B2		8/2004	Shon et al.	
6,871,676	B2		3/2005	Sus et al.	
6,874,828	B2		4/2005	Roafis et al.	
6,878,391	B2		4/2005	Veltrop	
6,884,451	B2		4/2005	Veltrop	
6,924,467	B2		8/2005	Ellis et al.	
7,105,779	B2		9/2006	Shei	
7,128,582	B2	*	10/2006	Fang	H01R 13/514 439/362
7,227,102	B2		6/2007	Shei	
7,328,654	B2		2/2008	Shei	
7,385,160	B2		6/2008	Jones	
7,407,392	B2		8/2008	Cooke et al.	
7,446,282	B2		11/2008	Shei et al.	
7,481,679	B1	*	1/2009	Stotz	H01R 12/7029 439/638
7,510,096	B2		3/2009	Wang	
7,687,748	B2		3/2010	Gagas	
7,708,135	B2		5/2010	Ellerth et al.	
7,721,877	B2		5/2010	Maine, Jr. et al.	
7,762,636	B2		7/2010	Veesser et al.	
7,800,023	B2		9/2010	Burtea et al.	
7,858,906	B2		12/2010	Veltrop et al.	
7,905,173	B2		3/2011	Sus et al.	
7,975,840	B2		7/2011	Messick, Jr. et al.	
7,987,972	B2		8/2011	Hennigar et al.	
8,091,472	B2		1/2012	Maciejewski et al.	

8,096,231	B2	1/2012	Veltrop et al.	
8,506,687	B2	8/2013	Jones	
8,522,675	B2	9/2013	Veltrop	
8,607,587	B2	12/2013	Veltrop	
8,674,823	B1 *	3/2014	Contario	H02J 1/10 340/333
8,810,417	B2	8/2014	Hood et al.	
8,813,960	B2	8/2014	Fjelland	
D716,095	S	10/2014	Veltrop et al.	
D725,429	S *	3/2015	Veltrop	D7/323
8,997,636	B2	4/2015	Kirby et al.	
9,112,298	B1	8/2015	Hayden et al.	
9,140,484	B2	9/2015	Veltrop	
9,187,210	B2	11/2015	Zhu et al.	
9,221,611	B2	12/2015	Ulchak et al.	
9,504,318	B1	11/2016	O'Keefe et al.	
9,693,655	B2	7/2017	Shei et al.	
2001/0007322	A1	7/2001	Shei et al.	
2001/0038011	A1	11/2001	Hillis	
2003/0034898	A1	2/2003	Shamoon et al.	
2003/0118706	A1	6/2003	Veltrop	
2003/0169801	A1	9/2003	Chilton	
2004/0020915	A1 *	2/2004	Shei	A47J 39/006 219/385
2004/0056761	A1	3/2004	Vaseloff et al.	
2005/0122656	A1 *	6/2005	Lee	G06F 1/1632 361/118
2005/0211696	A1	9/2005	Adamski	
2006/0050184	A1 *	3/2006	McMiller	H04N 5/4401 348/725
2006/0123174	A1 *	6/2006	Nguyen	G07F 17/32 710/301
2006/0185527	A1 *	8/2006	Shei	A47J 39/006 99/467
2007/0000905	A1	1/2007	Imgram et al.	
2007/0017245	A1	1/2007	Song et al.	
2007/0144202	A1	6/2007	Theodos et al.	
2007/0186570	A1	8/2007	Kopf	
2007/0236346	A1	10/2007	Helal et al.	
2008/0005395	A1 *	1/2008	Ong	G06F 13/385 710/36
2008/0008795	A1	1/2008	Thorneywork et al.	
2008/0023462	A1 *	1/2008	Shei	A47J 39/006 219/394
2008/0156009	A1	7/2008	Cur et al.	
2008/0156030	A1	7/2008	Cur et al.	
2008/0283440	A1	11/2008	Hartsfield, Jr. et al.	
2008/0302778	A1	12/2008	Veltrop et al.	
2009/0126580	A1	5/2009	Hartfelder et al.	
2009/0199723	A1	8/2009	Veltrop et al.	
2009/0199725	A1 *	8/2009	Veltrop	A47J 37/0623 99/483
2009/0252842	A1	10/2009	Wang et al.	
2009/0266244	A1	10/2009	Maciejewski et al.	
2010/0025267	A1 *	2/2010	Brand	A47G 19/2227 206/216
2010/0101254	A1	4/2010	Besore et al.	
2010/0162747	A1	7/2010	Hamel et al.	
2010/0186600	A1	7/2010	Lewis et al.	
2010/0191474	A1	7/2010	Haick	
2010/0192609	A1	8/2010	Chae et al.	
2010/0275789	A1	11/2010	Lee et al.	
2010/0307188	A1	12/2010	Kwon et al.	
2010/0326286	A1	12/2010	Romero et al.	
2011/0011109	A1	1/2011	Rafalovich et al.	
2011/0030565	A1	2/2011	Shei	
2011/0239675	A1	10/2011	Roekens	
2011/0253698	A1	10/2011	Theodos et al.	
2011/0253703	A1	10/2011	Theodos et al.	
2011/0283714	A1	11/2011	Veltrop	
2011/0283895	A1	11/2011	Veltrop	
2012/0023987	A1	2/2012	Besore et al.	
2012/0079699	A1	4/2012	Veltrop et al.	
2013/0055002	A1 *	2/2013	Brooks	G06F 1/266 713/340
2013/0125193	A1 *	5/2013	Wells	H04N 7/17309 725/123

(56)

References Cited**U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS**

2013/0242497 A1* 9/2013 Lin H01R 31/065
361/679.32

2013/0277353 A1 10/2013 Joseph et al.

2014/0136749 A1* 5/2014 North G06F 13/4022
710/313

2014/0150461 A1 6/2014 Veltrop

2014/0231406 A1* 8/2014 Tsang A61M 5/44
219/394

2014/0263269 A1* 9/2014 Veltrop F24C 7/043
219/394

2014/0345474 A1 11/2014 Trench Rocha et al.

2015/0129395 A1 5/2015 Messick, Jr.

2015/0151919 A1 6/2015 Messick, Jr. et al.

2015/0191312 A1 7/2015 Ulchak et al.

2015/0327726 A1 11/2015 Betzod et al.

2015/0338917 A1* 11/2015 Steiner H04L 9/3231
345/156

2016/0176568 A1 6/2016 Glasgow et al.

2016/0185529 A1 6/2016 Bauer

2016/0185530 A1 6/2016 Malkowski et al.

2016/0204711 A1* 7/2016 Morrow H02M 7/06
363/126

2016/0296012 A1* 10/2016 Ciccacci A47B 77/08

2017/0071408 A1 3/2017 Veltrop et al.

2017/0071409 A1 3/2017 Veltrop

2017/0071410 A1 3/2017 Veltrop et al.

2017/0071411 A1 3/2017 Veltrop et al.

2017/0071412 A1 3/2017 Veltrop et al.

2017/0150843 A1 6/2017 Rosalia et al.

2017/0324576 A1* 11/2017 Jain G06F 9/50

FOREIGN PATENT DOCUMENTS

CN 204189001 U 3/2015

CN 206440961 U 8/2017

WO WO-2013062832 A1 5/2013

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

“Modular Holding Cabinets”, Product Catalog, Carter-Hoffmann, Mundelein, Illinois (Jan. 2014).

U.S. Appl. No. 14/850,914, Notice of Allowance, dated Oct. 16, 2017.

U.S. Appl. No. 14/850,921, Nonfinal Office Action, dated Aug. 23, 2017.

U.S. Appl. No. 14/850,930, Nonfinal Office Action, dated Sep. 1, 2017.

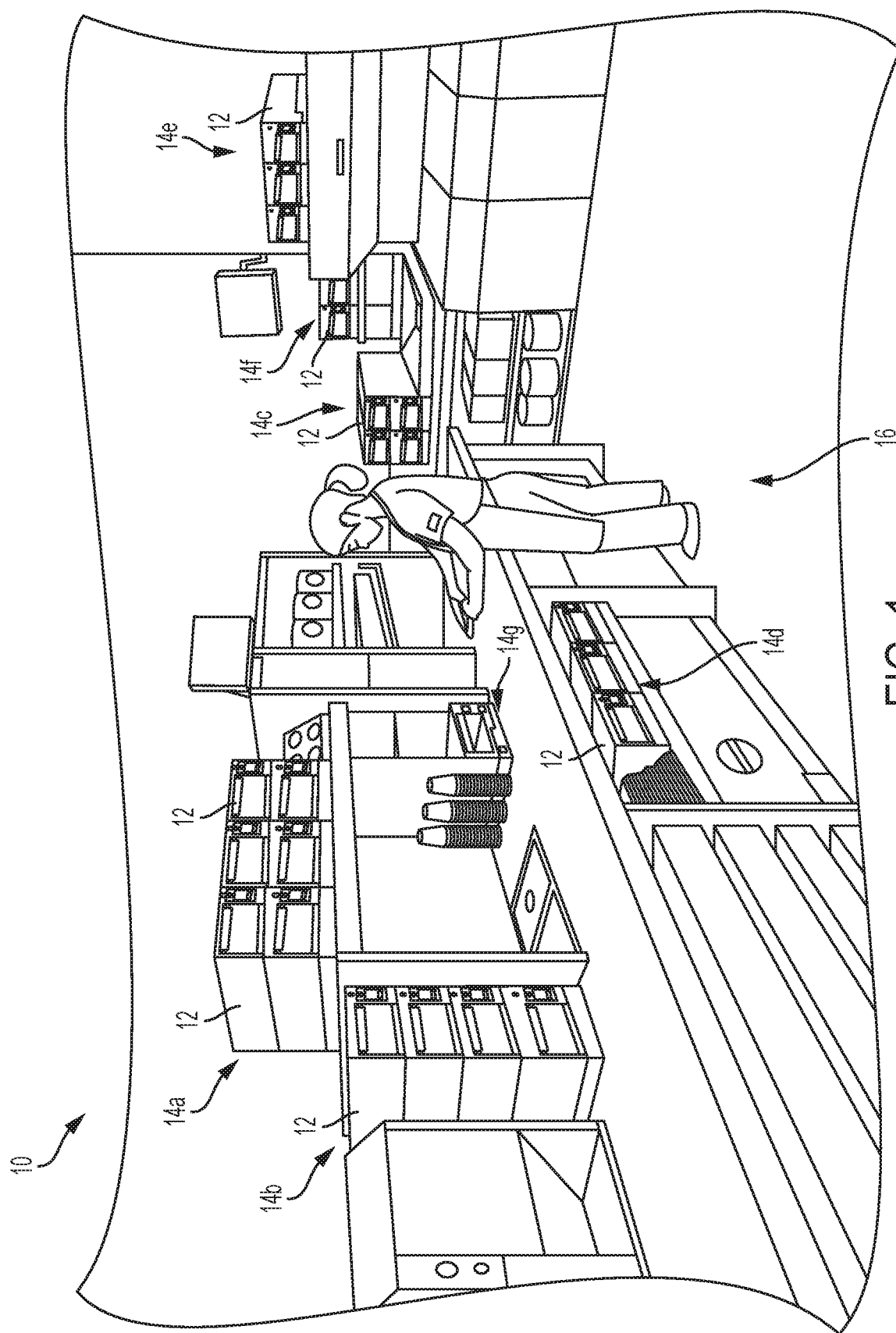
U.S. Appl. No. 14/850,937, Nonfinal Office Action, dated Sep. 13, 2017.

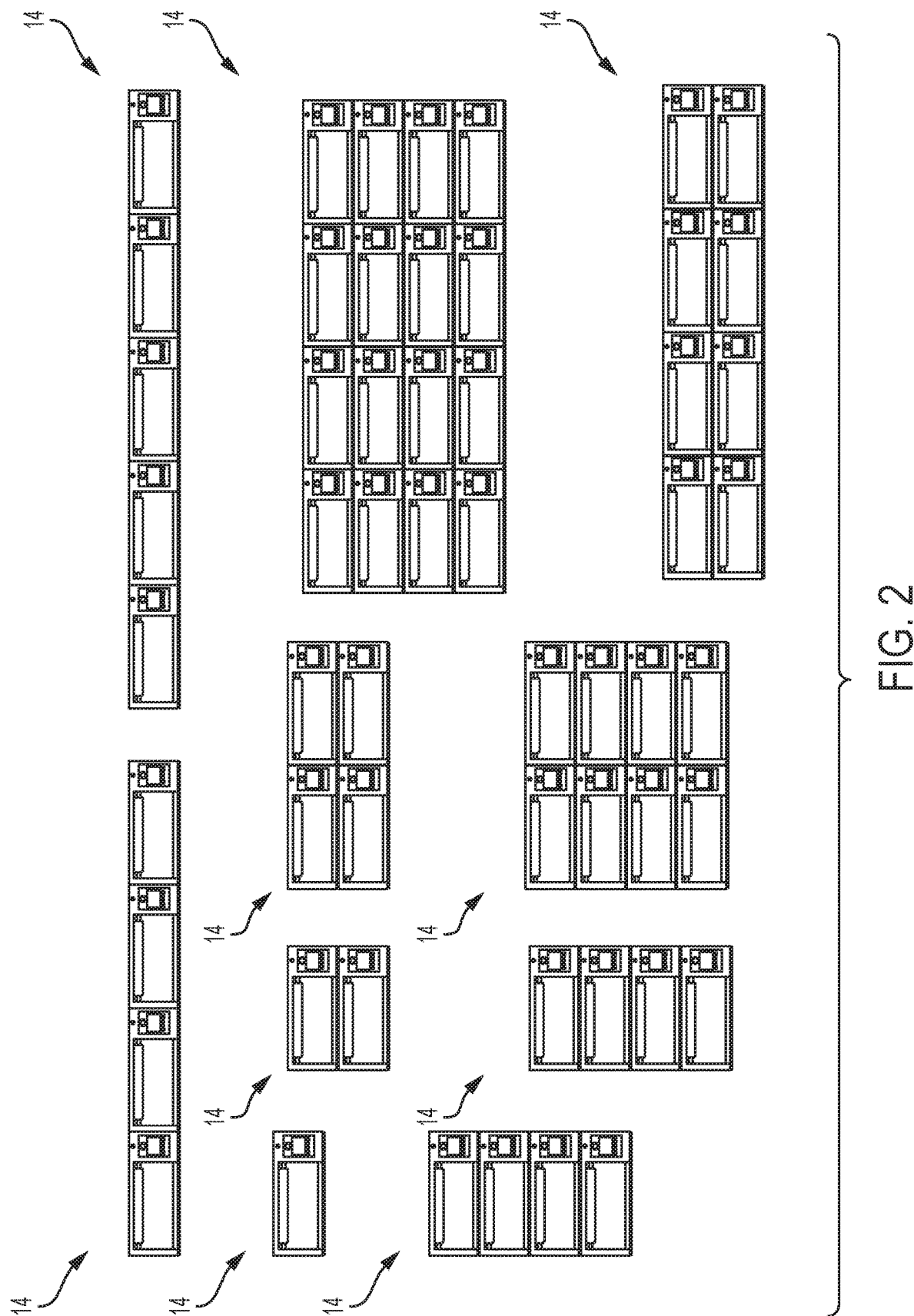
U.S. Appl. No. 14/850,914, Nonfinal Office Action, dated Feb. 23, 2017.

U.S. Appl. No. 14/850,944, Nonfinal Office Action, dated Jul. 6, 2017.

First Office Action for Chinese Patent Application No. 201610812668.5, dated Jan. 25, 2021.

* cited by examiner





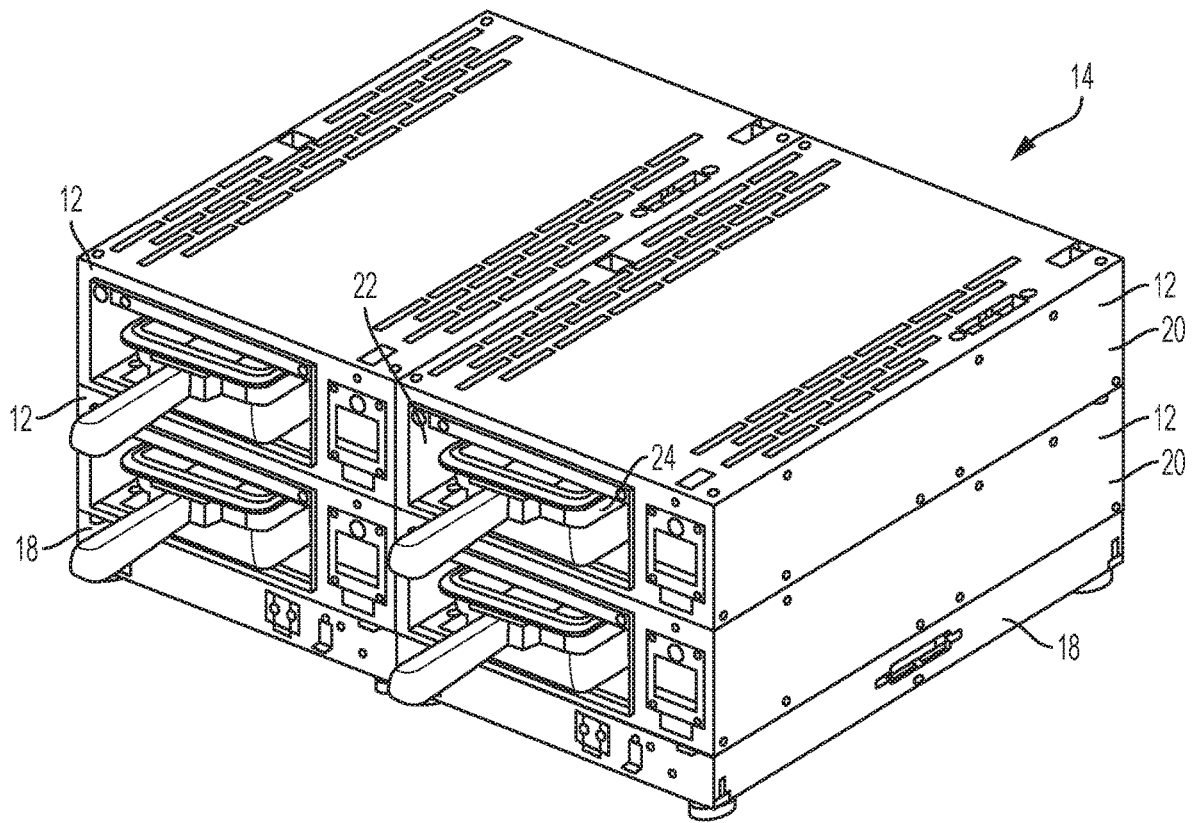


FIG. 3

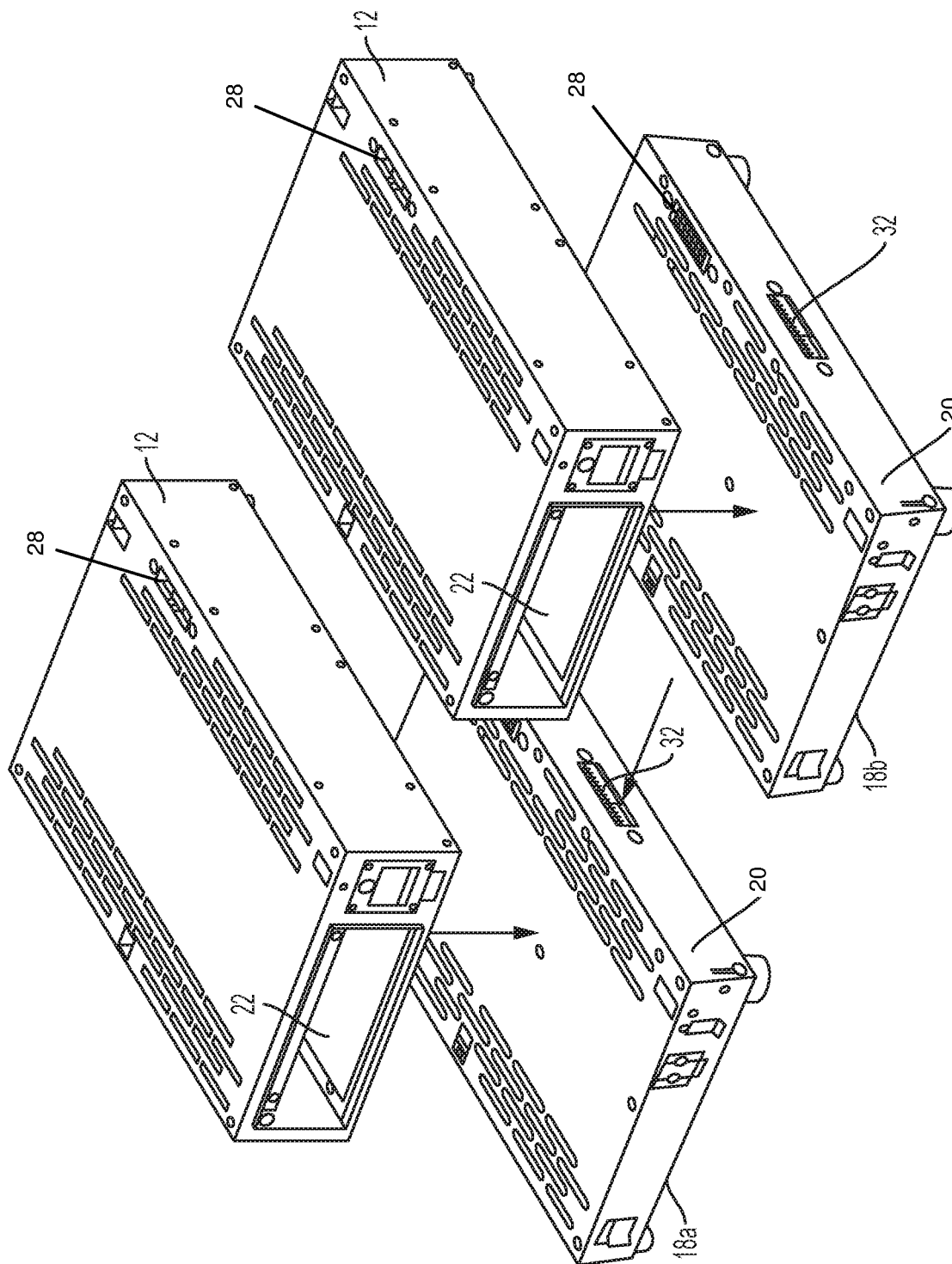


FIG. 4

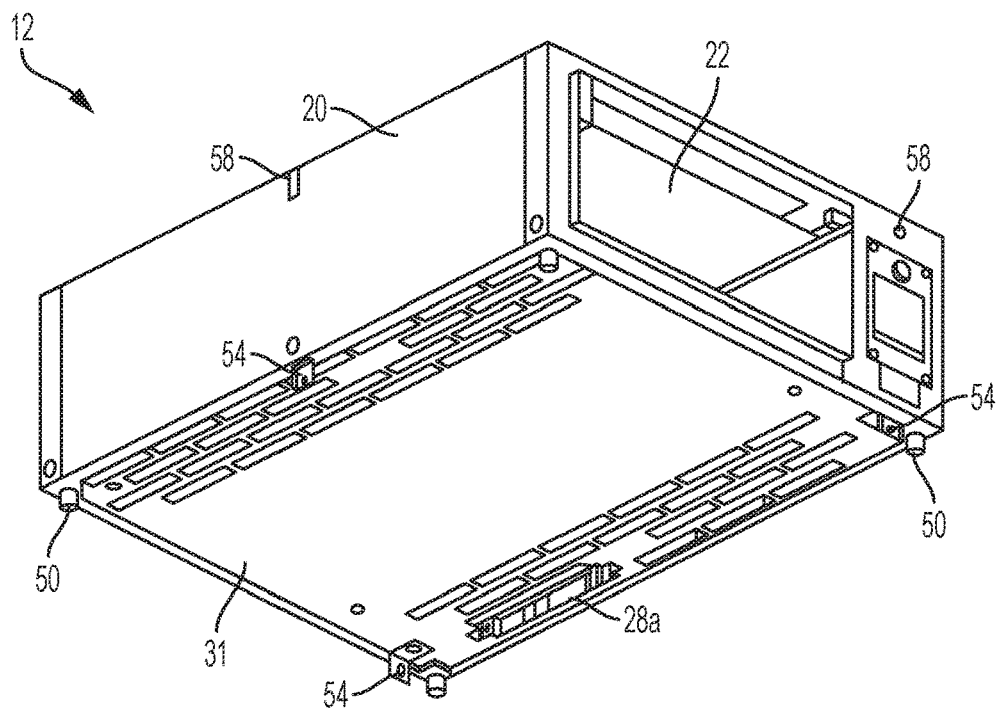


FIG. 5

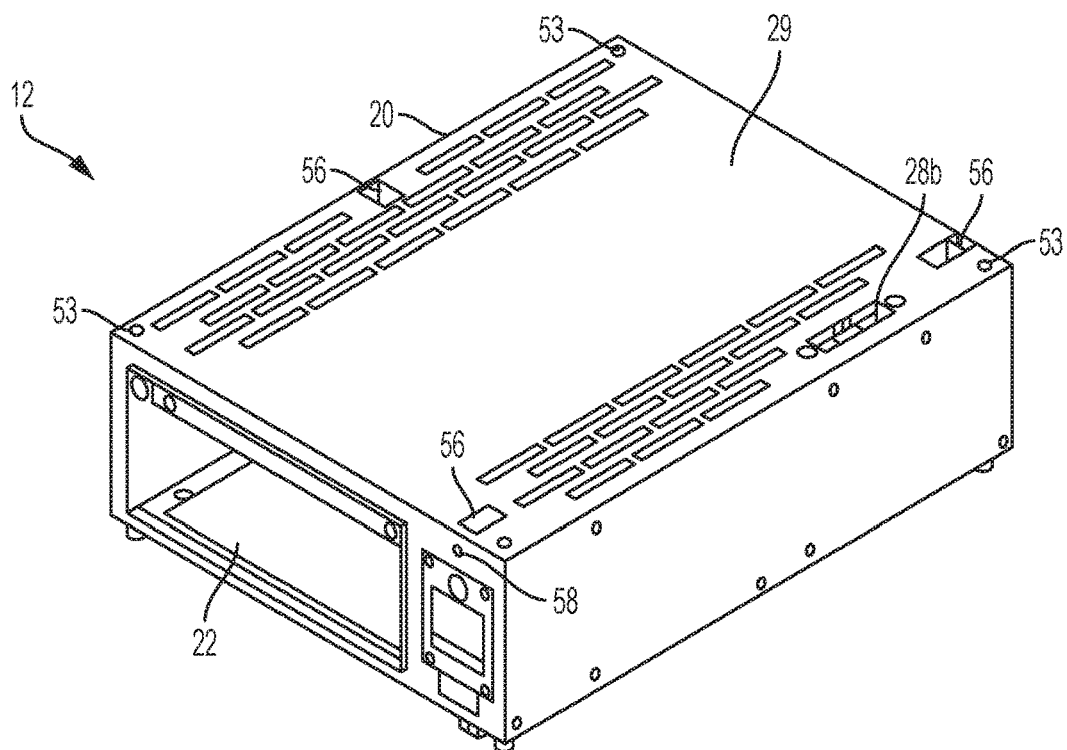


FIG. 6

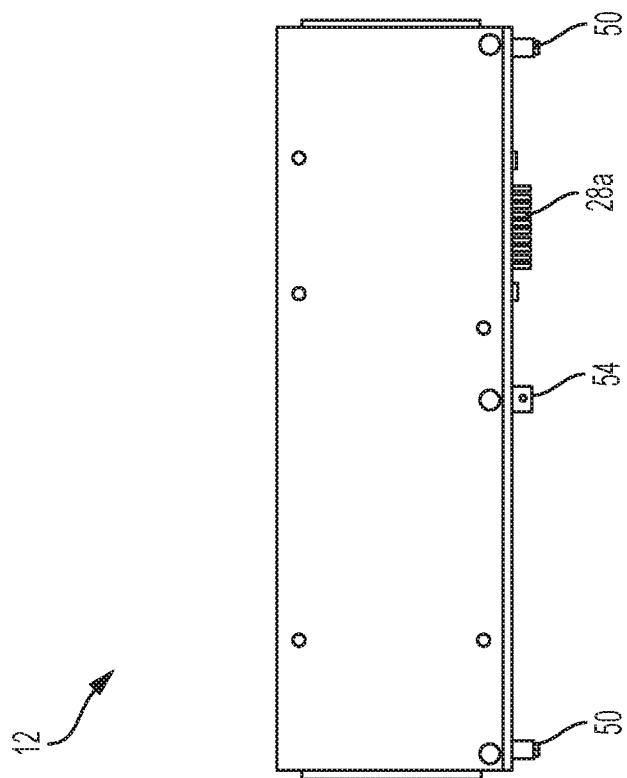


FIG. 8

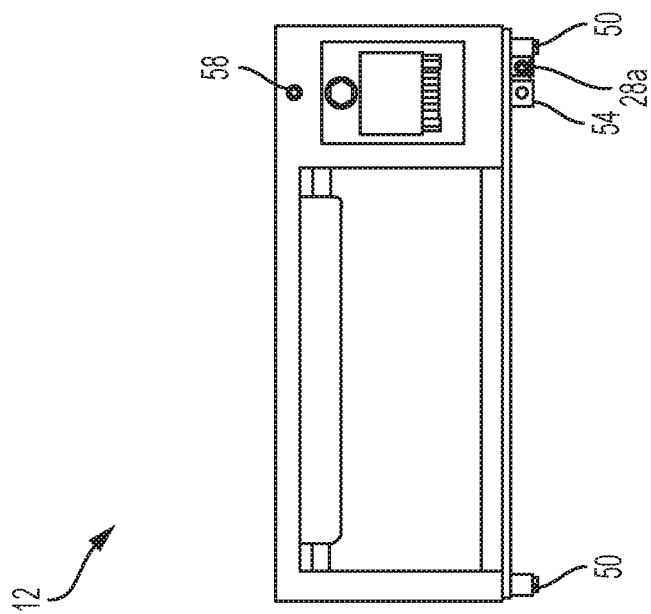


FIG. 7

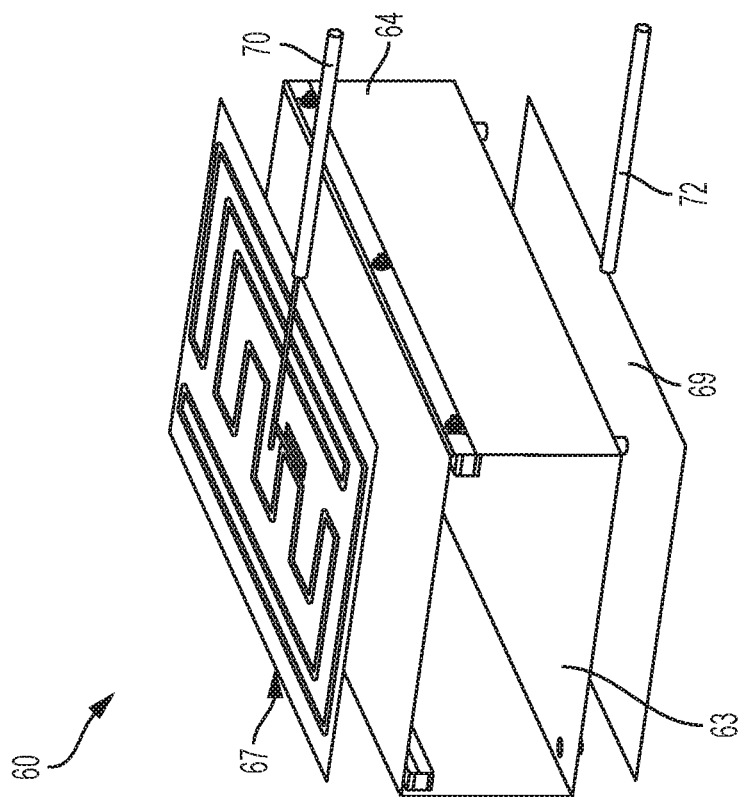


FIG. 9

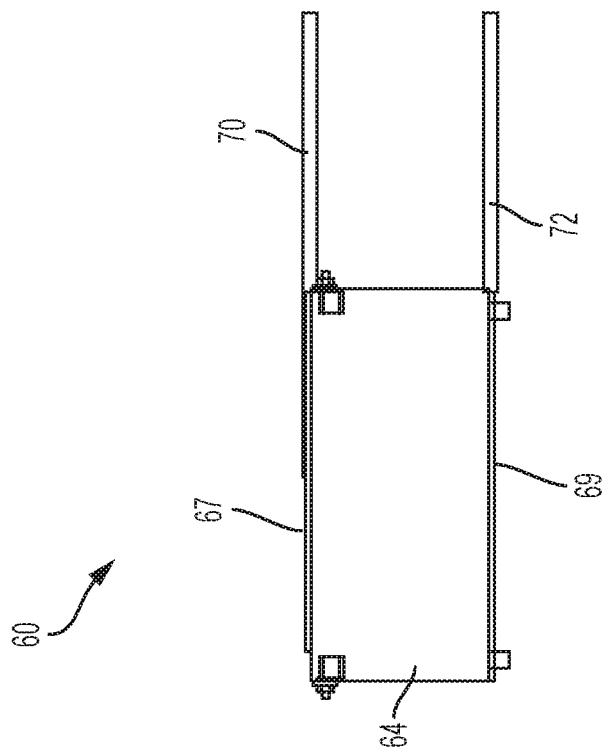


FIG. 10

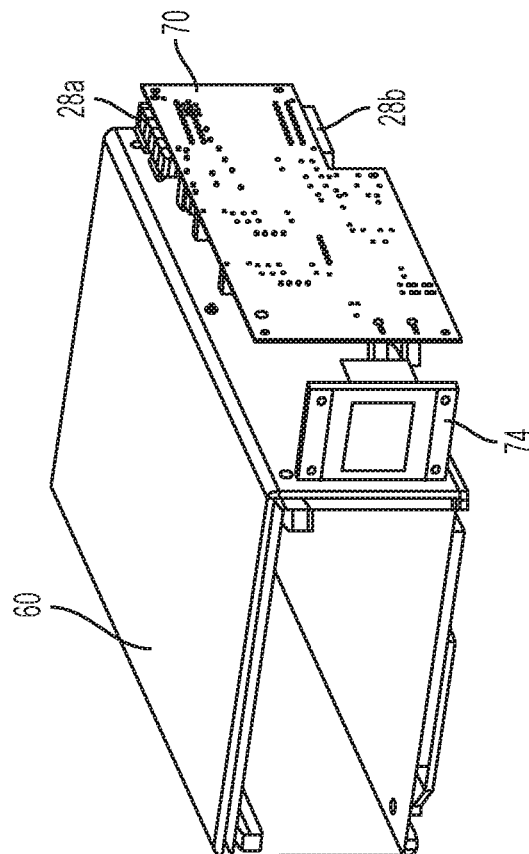


FIG. 11

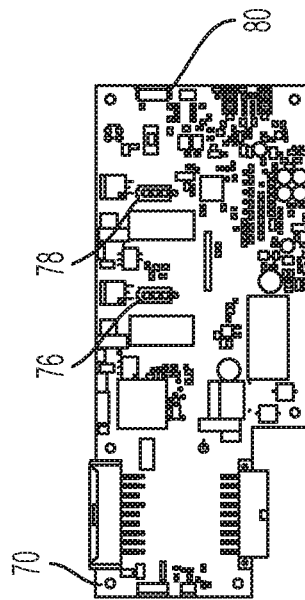


FIG. 12

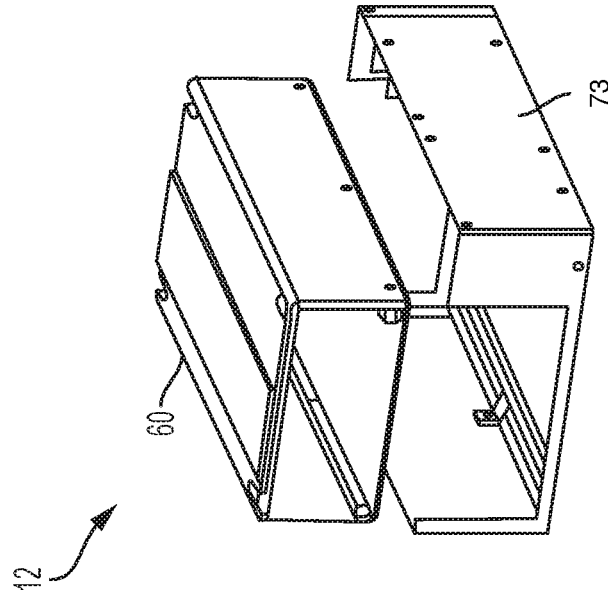


FIG. 14

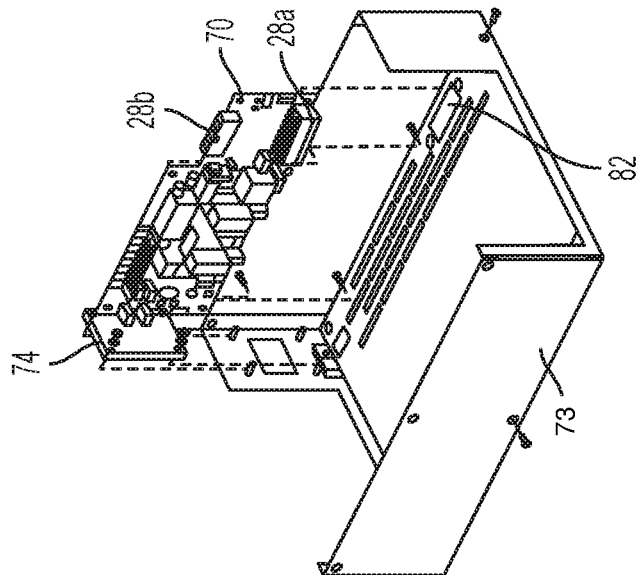


FIG. 13

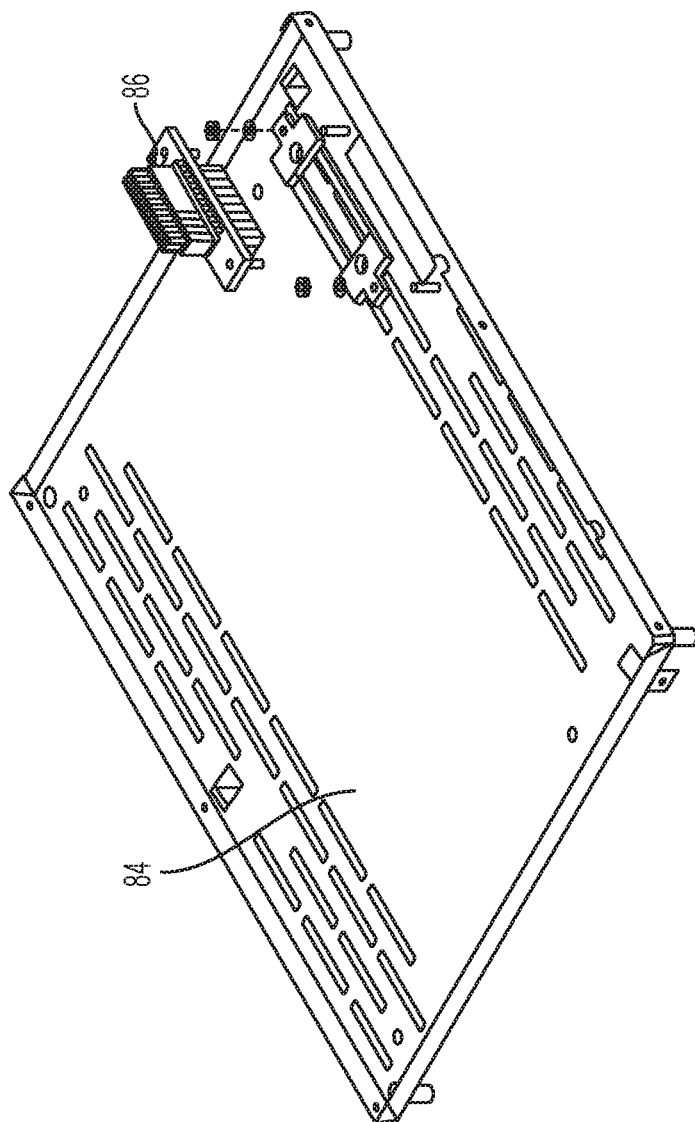


FIG. 15

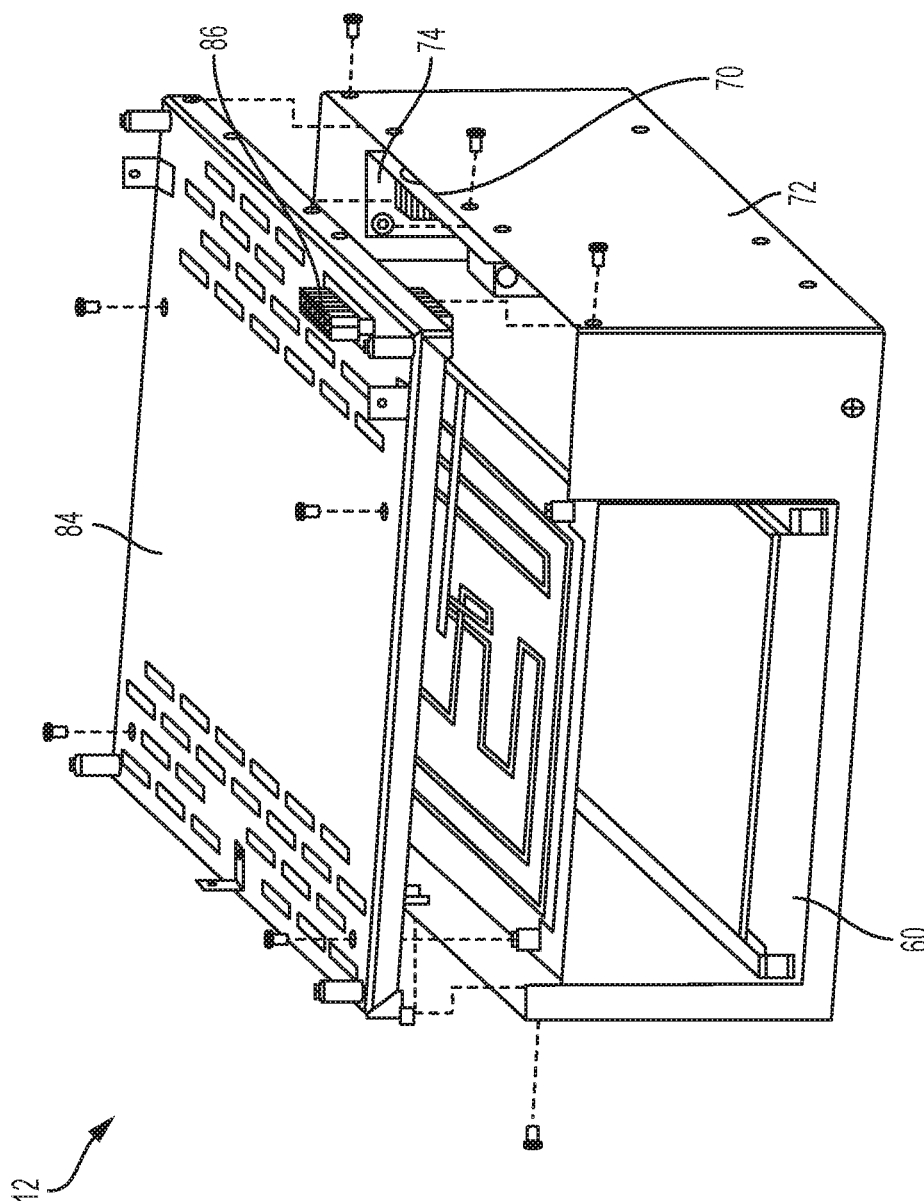


FIG. 16

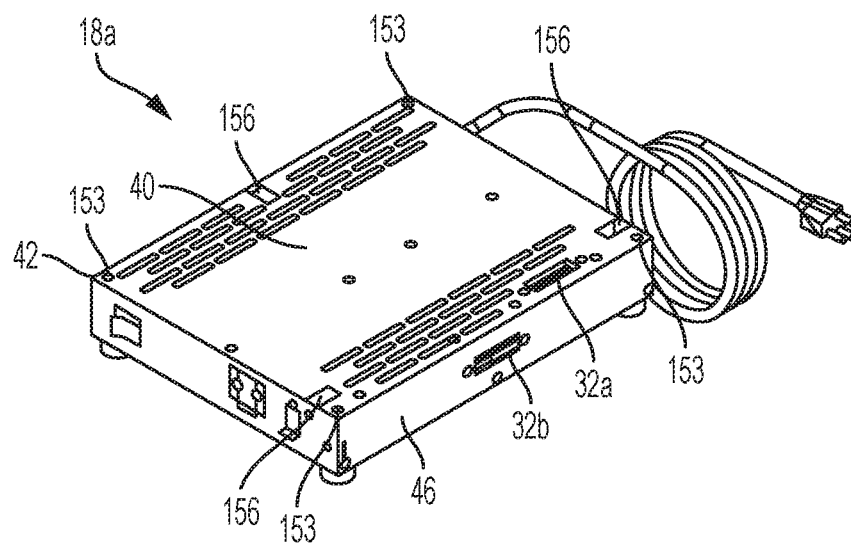


FIG. 17

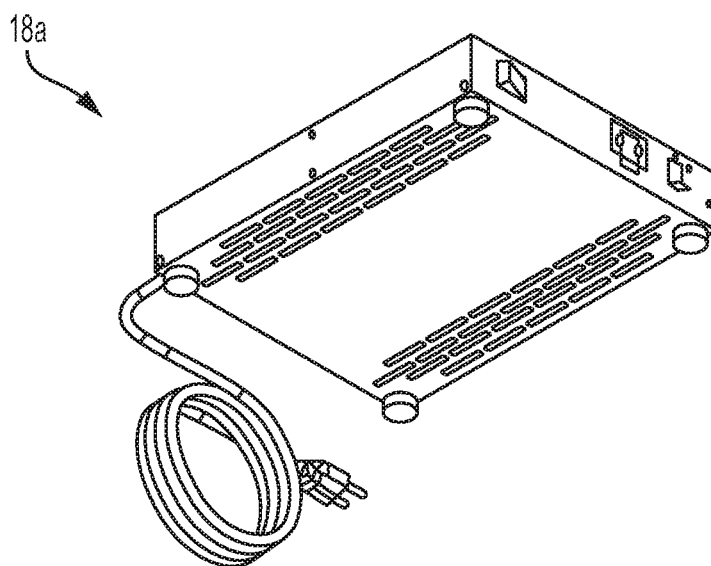


FIG. 18

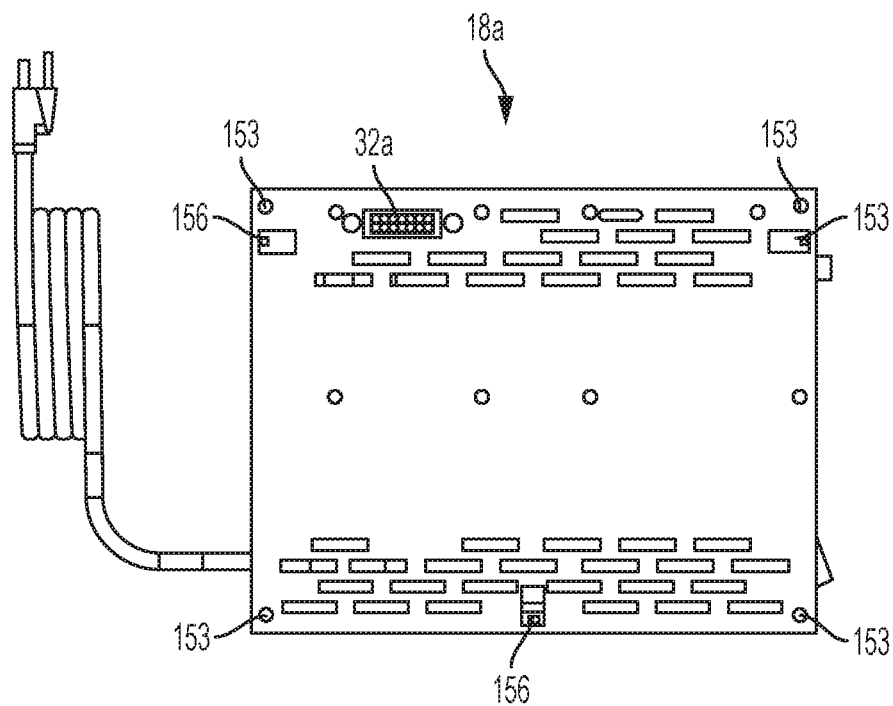


FIG. 19

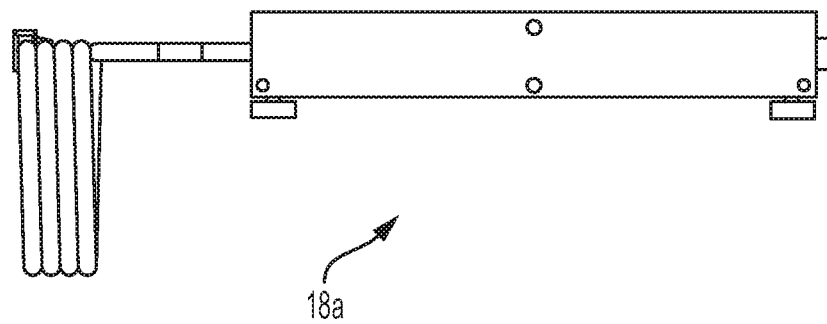


FIG. 20

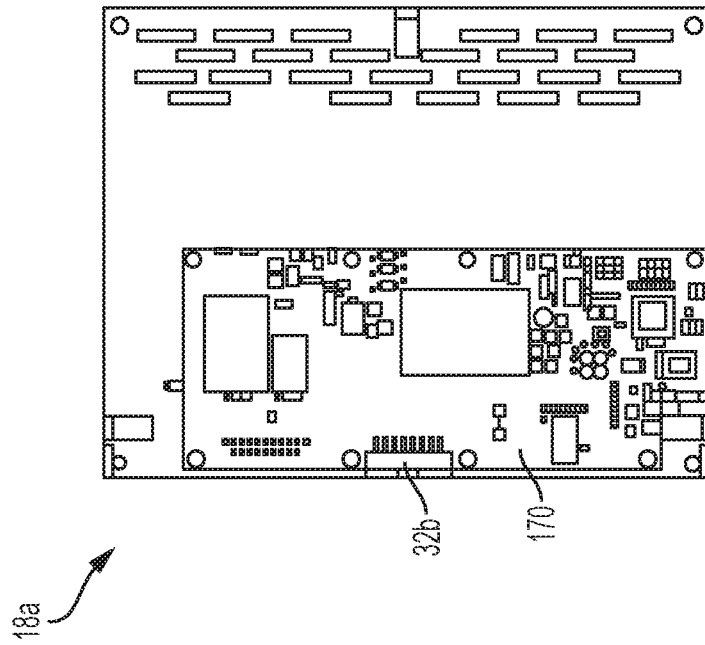


FIG. 22

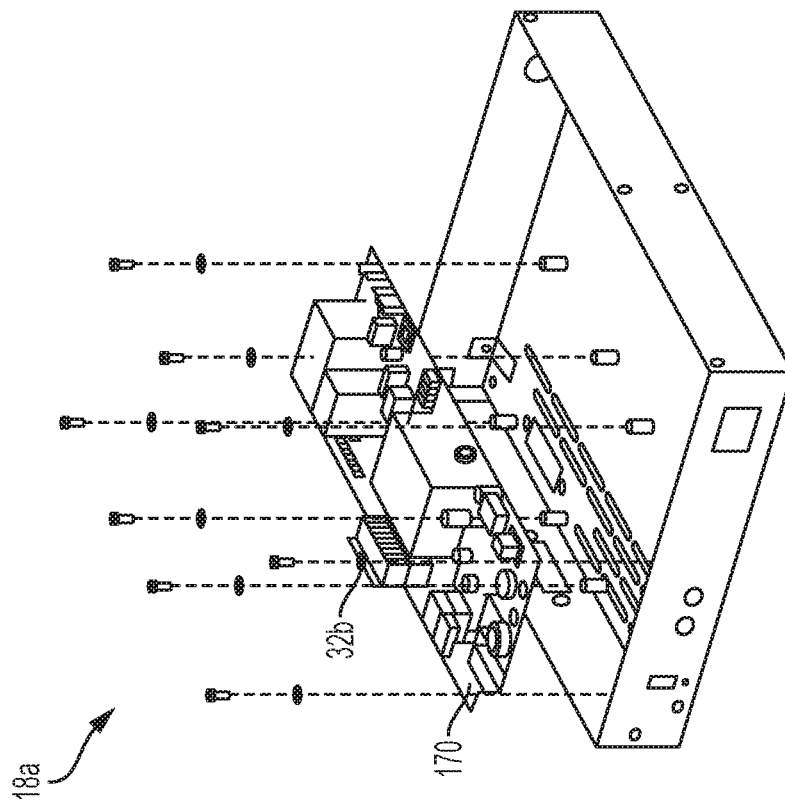


FIG. 21

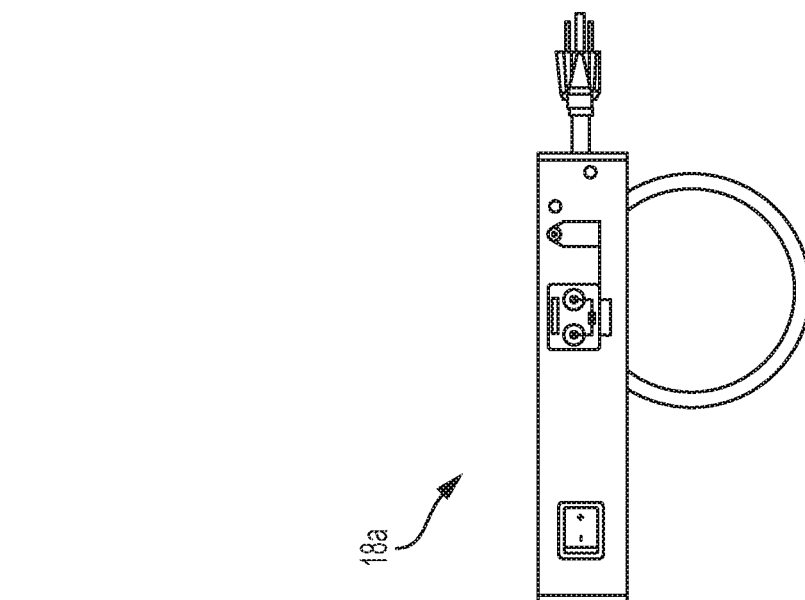


FIG. 24

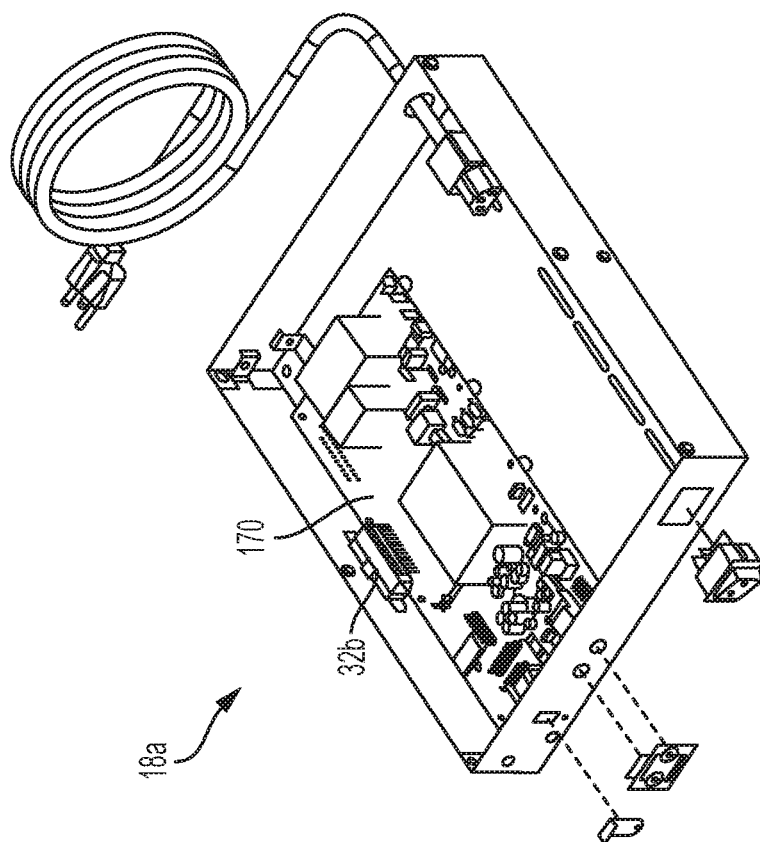


FIG. 23

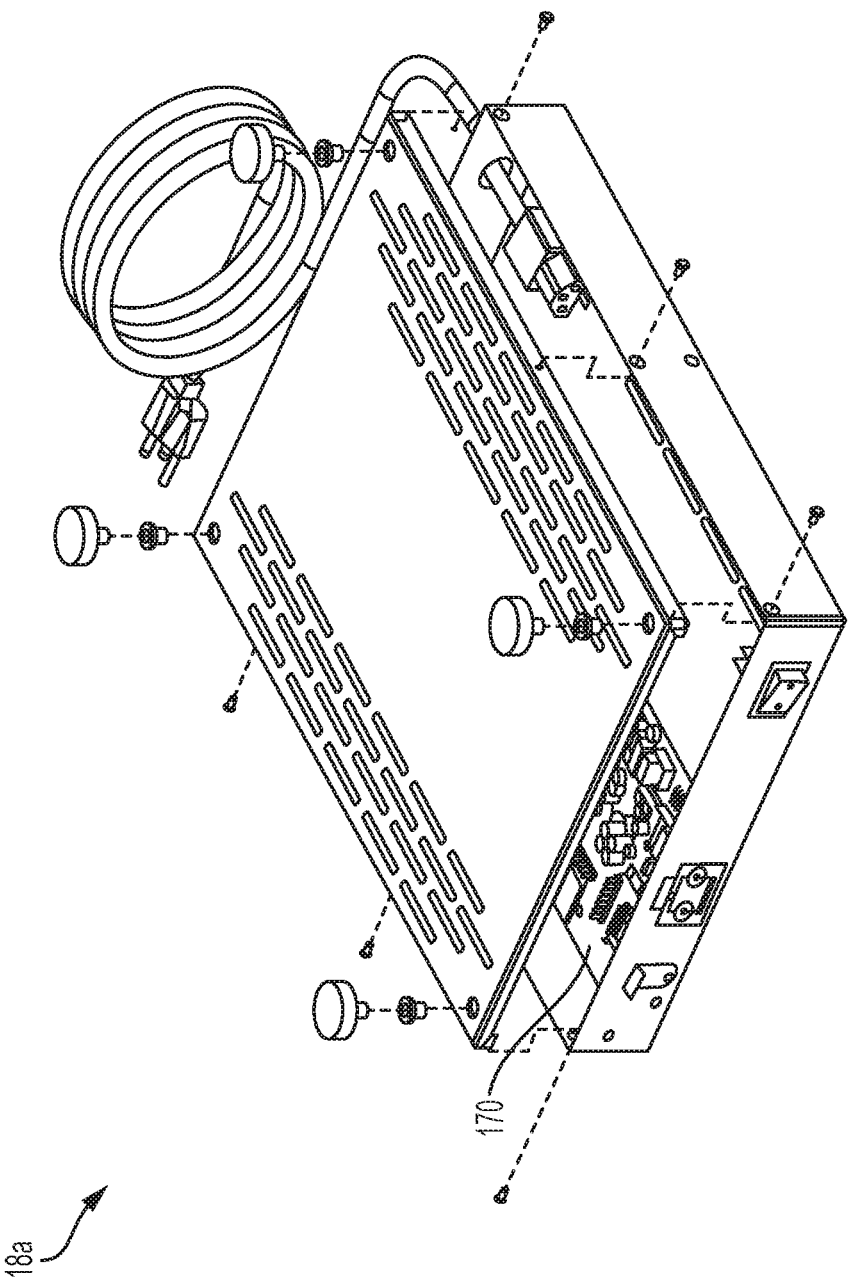


FIG. 25

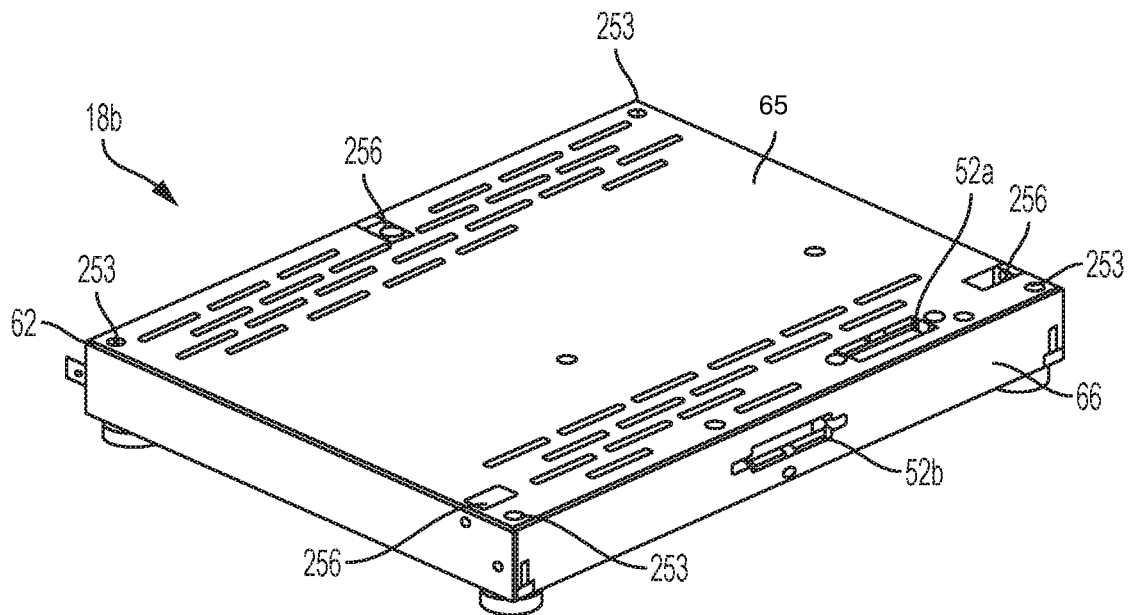


FIG. 26

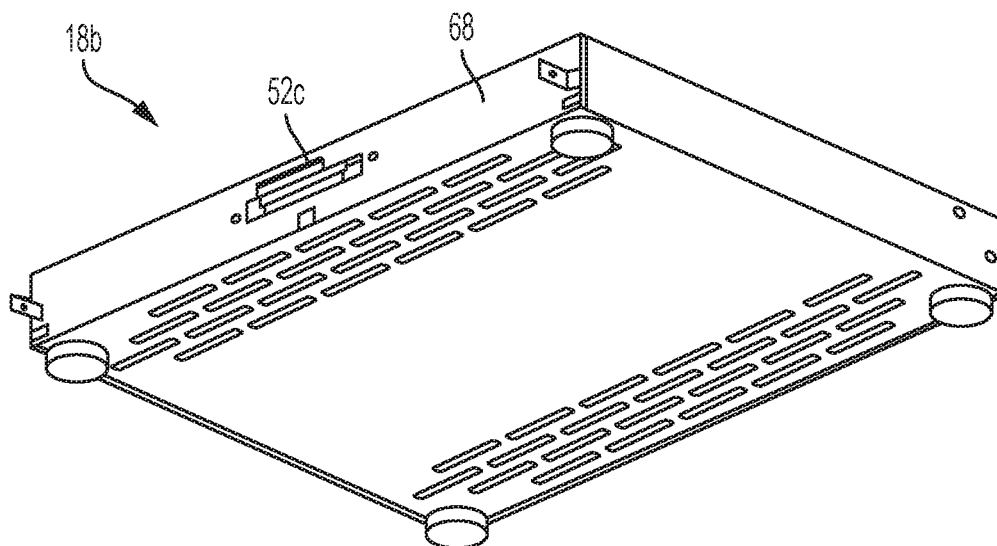


FIG. 27

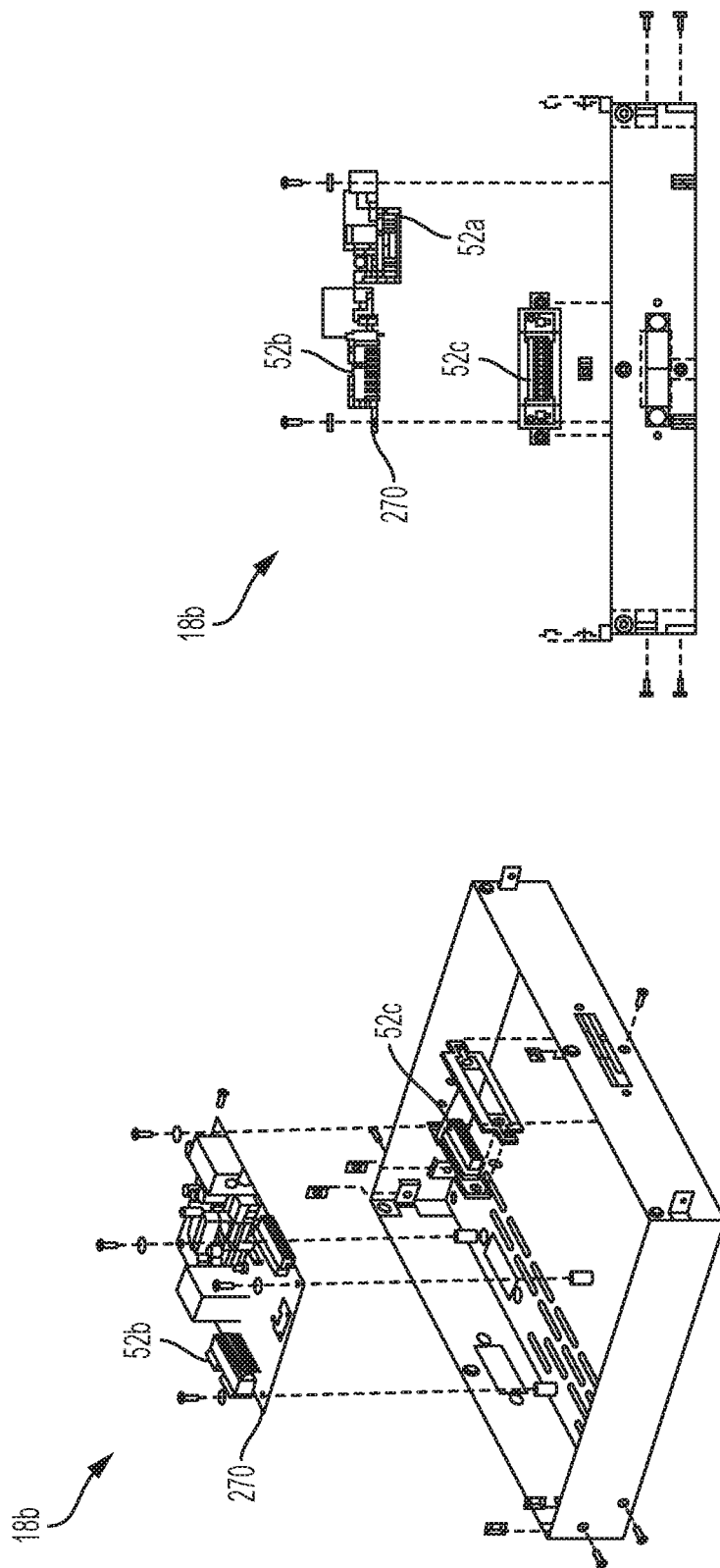


FIG. 28

FIG. 29

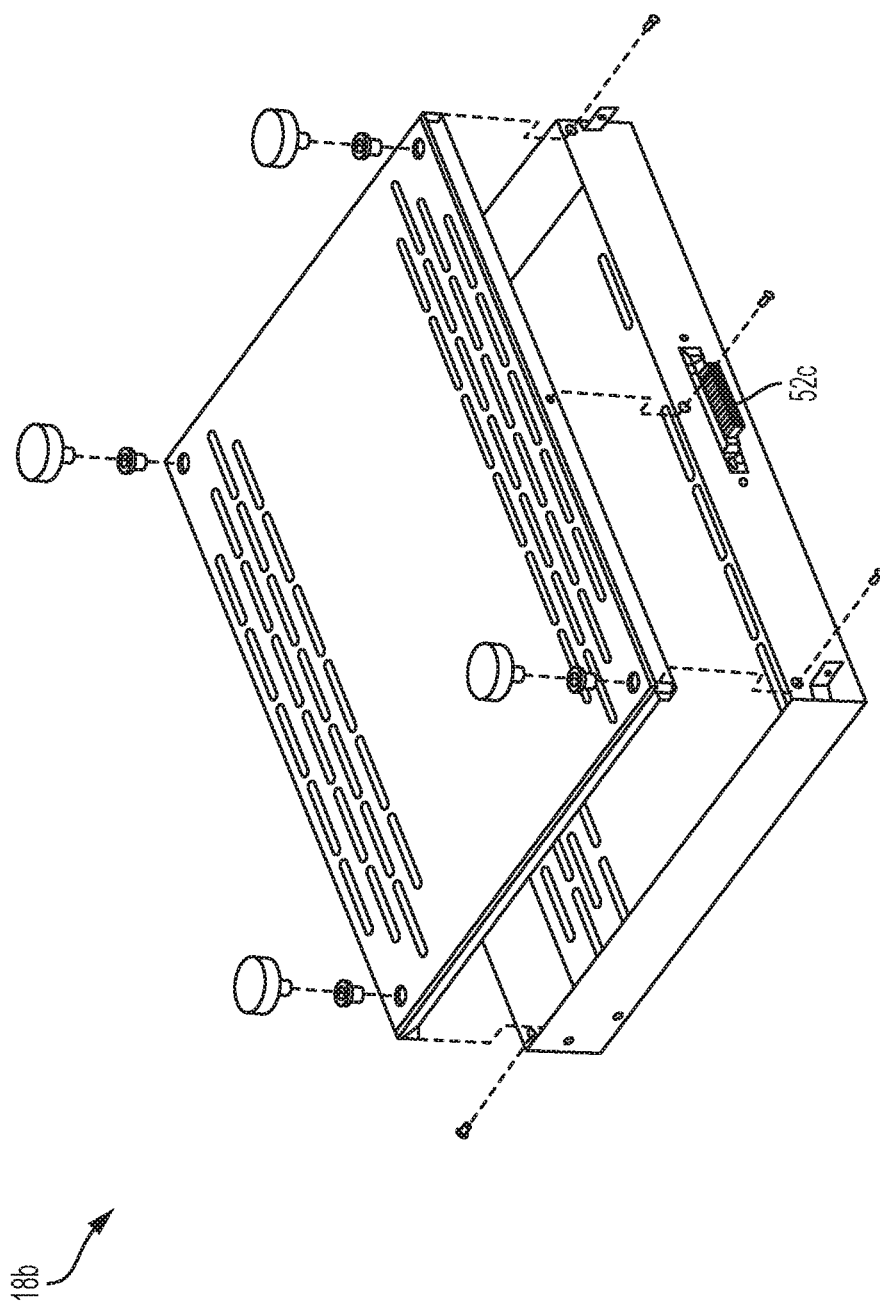


FIG. 30

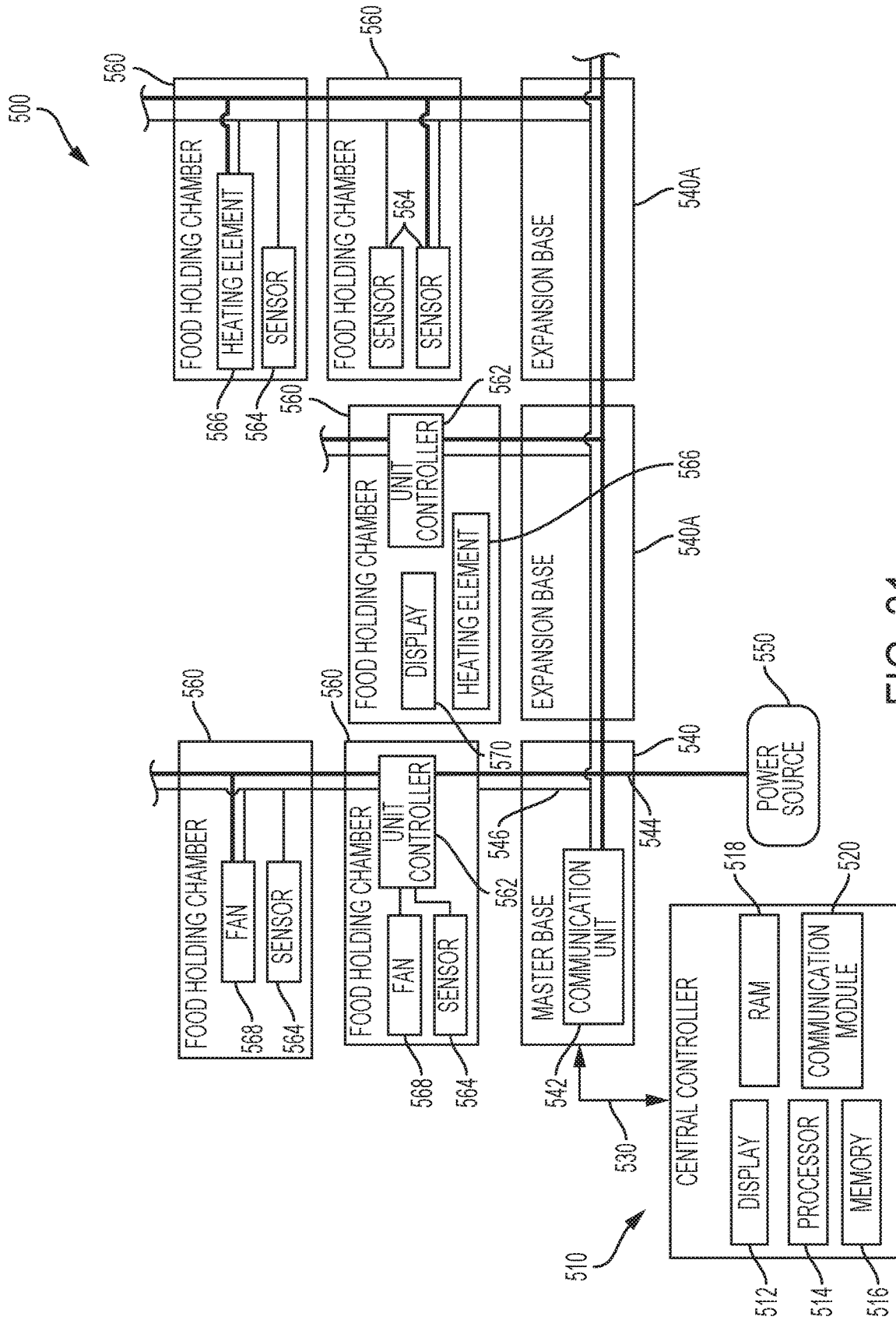


FIG. 31

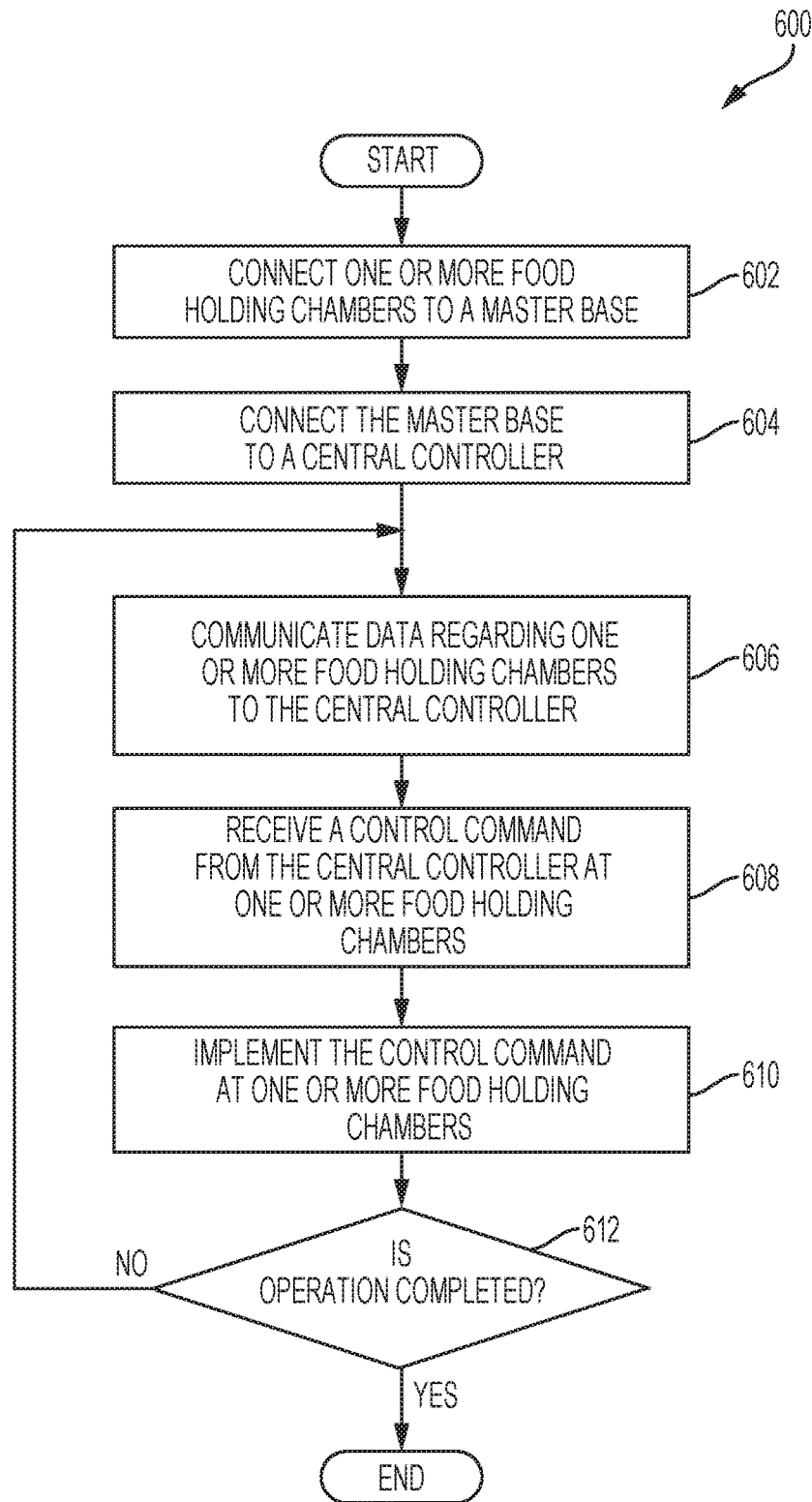


FIG. 32

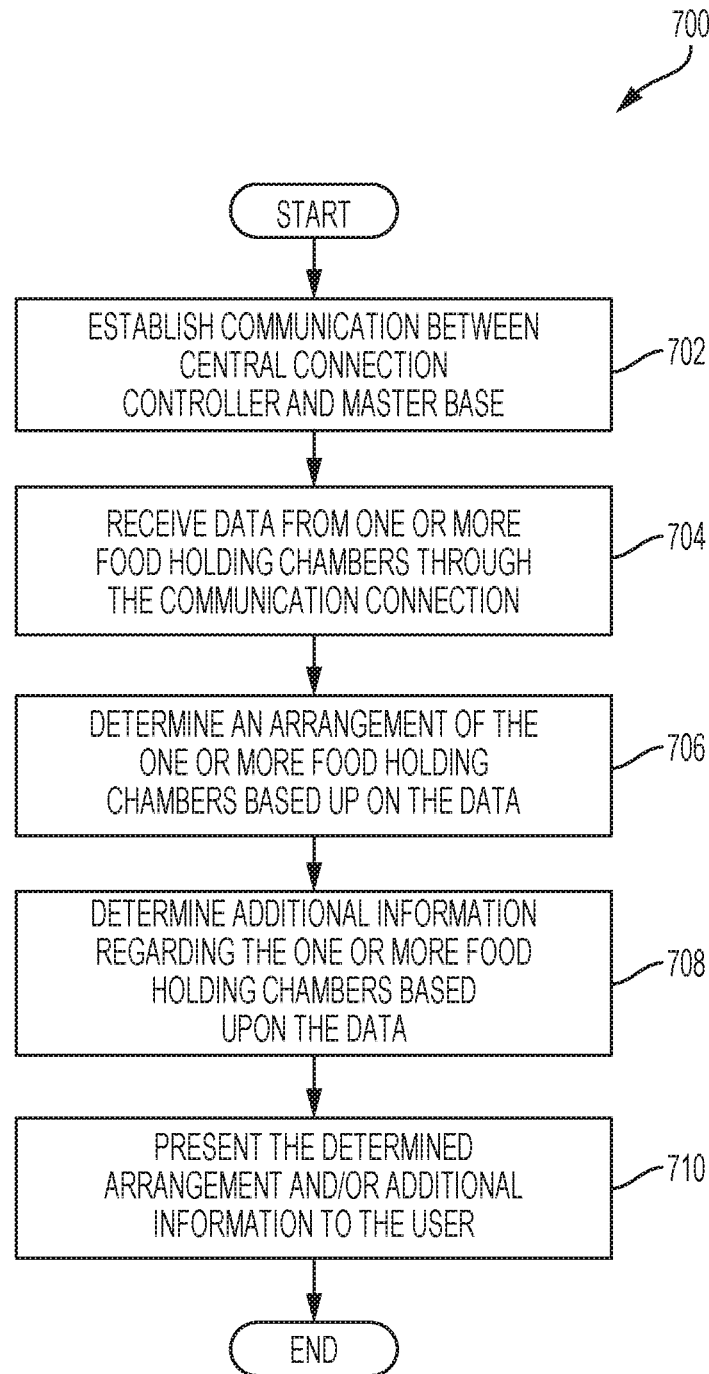


FIG. 33

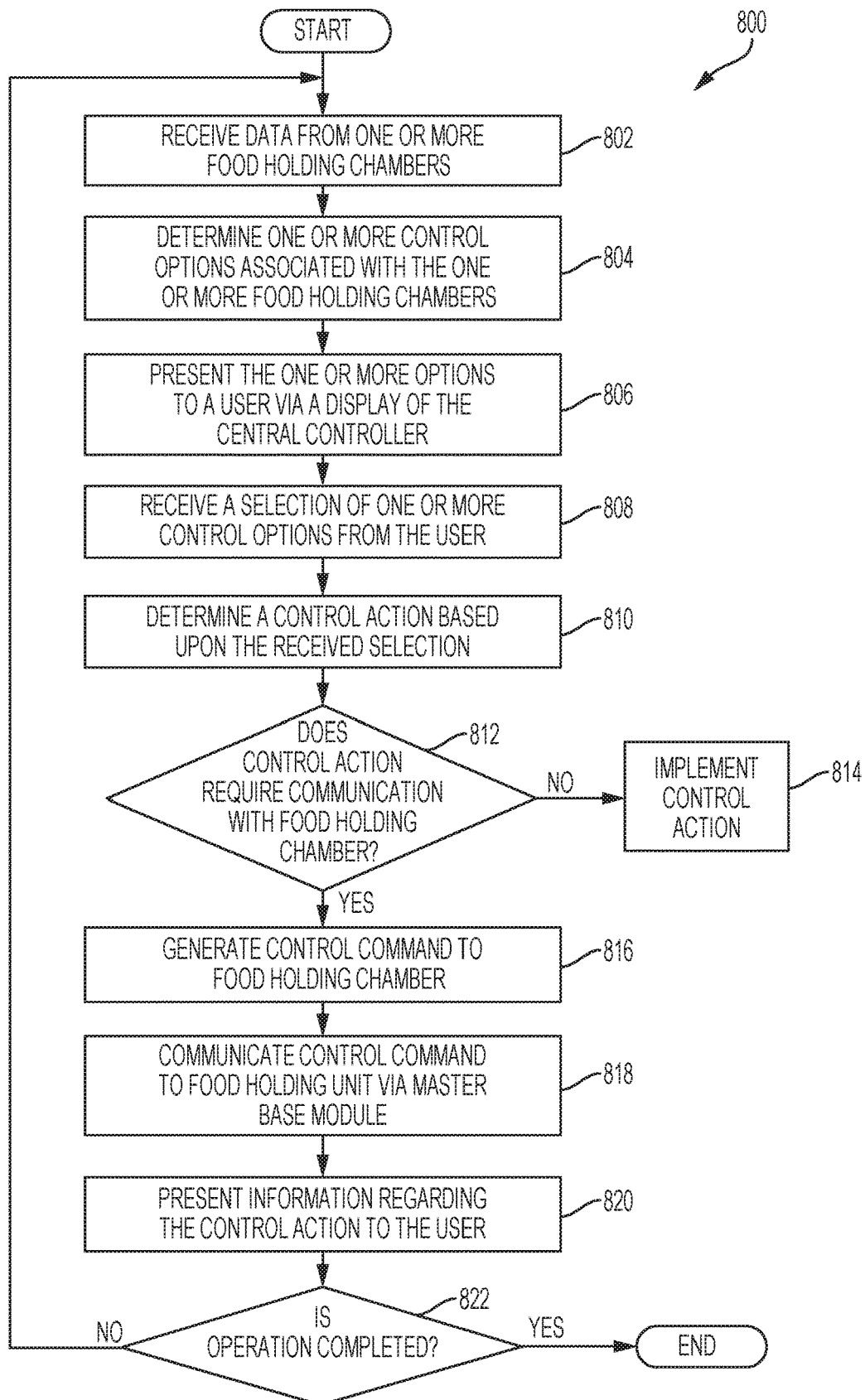


FIG. 34

1

MODULAR FOOD HOLDING SYSTEM**FIELD OF THE INVENTION**

The invention relates generally to food holding systems and more specifically to reconfigurable modular food holding systems.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Restaurant success often depends on how quickly customers can be served with food items that a customer orders and on the quality of the food items when served. If the rate at which a restaurant prepares food items equals the rate at which those same food items are ordered and sold, a restaurant can theoretically have freshly-prepared food items ready to serve as customers order food items. Since it is not always possible to match food item production with customer ordering rates, and since certain fast food restaurant customers expect to receive their ordered food items quickly, many quick service food restaurants prepare various food items before customers order and keep food items ready for sale until a customer arrives and orders a prepared food item.

Holding systems to keep prepared food items ready for sale allow a cooked or ready-to-consume food item to be put into the system (e.g., an oven or a refrigerator) from one side and to be taken from the system on the opposite side thereby allowing food preparers to add food to the system and food servers to take food from the system.

Current holding systems come in various fixed sizes but the holding systems are not reconfigurable. Rather, such current holding systems are typically purchased “off the shelf” from a manufacturer/retailer or are custom designed to meet a specific user’s specific needs. Regardless, current holding systems are “fixed” and thus not reconfigurable. Such fixed dimensional holding units limit food preparation layouts which may have to be modified or altered, for numerous reasons, relatively frequently. For example, as quick serve restaurants add or change menu items, food preparation layouts may need to be adjusted. Additionally, different configurations may be desirable to facilitate increased production of different menu items at different times, for example, different menu items and holding capabilities may be desirable at breakfast than at lunch or dinner. Fixed dimensional holding systems limit the degree to which the food preparation layouts may be reconfigured.

Moreover, after remodeling a kitchen, existing fixed holding systems may not be properly sized for the reconfigured kitchen. This may lead to the purchase of new food holding systems at considerable expense or to undesirable or inefficient food preparation layout.

Generally speaking, food holding systems in the restaurant industry should be easy to operate, for example, because of the high turnover of personnel, which often requires frequent training of new personnel. Thus, it would be beneficial to provide a more flexible, reconfigurable, and easy to operate food holding system.

SUMMARY

In one aspect, a modular food holding system includes a master base configured to communicatively connect each of one or more food holding chambers to a central controller, a first food holding chamber directly connected to the master base, the first food holding chamber having a first chamber body, and a second food holding chamber connected to the

2

master base through either (i) the first food holding chamber or (ii) an expansion base connected to the master base, the second food holding chamber having a second chamber body. The first food holding chamber has a first chamber upstream power and communications port located on a bottom surface of the first chamber housing and a first chamber downstream power and communications port located on a top surface of the first chamber housing. The second food holding chamber has a second upstream power and communications port located on a bottom surface of the second chamber housing and a second chamber downstream power and communications port located on a top surface of the second chamber housing.

The modular food holding system may include one or more of the following preferred forms.

In some forms, the food holding cavity may include one of a blind cavity and a through cavity.

In other forms, the first food holding chamber may include a first alignment structure on the bottom surface of the first chamber housing.

In yet other preferred forms, the second food holding chamber may include a second alignment structure on the top surface of the second chamber housing, the second alignment structure cooperating with the first alignment structure to align the first food holding chamber with the second food holding chamber when the first and second food holding chambers are stacked to form a food holding unit.

In yet other preferred forms, the first alignment structure may be a post that extends away from the bottom surface of the first chamber housing and the second alignment structure may be a hole.

In yet other preferred forms, the post may extend away from the bottom surface of the first chamber housing a greater distance than the first power and communications port.

In yet other preferred forms, the first food holding chamber may include a first securing mechanism on the bottom surface of the first chamber housing and the second food holding chamber may include a second securing structure on the top surface of the second chamber housing.

In yet other preferred forms, the first securing mechanism may be a bracket and the second securing mechanism may be an opening.

In yet other preferred forms, the first food holding chamber may include a power safety adapter that is operatively connected to the first upstream power and communications port.

In other aspects, methods and systems for monitoring and controlling a modular food holding system are disclosed herein. The modular food holding system may include a master base communicatively connected to a plurality of food holding chambers and to a central controller, such that the central controller communicates with the food holding chambers through the master base. The food holding chambers may be identical or functionally identical, and some food holding chambers may connect to the master base through other food holding chambers or expansion bases. Each food holding chamber may include an upstream connection and a downstream connection, each having a power connection and a communication connection. In some embodiments, the master base may be incorporated into one of the modular food holding chambers.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a modular food holding system.

FIG. 2 is a plan view of the modular food holding system of FIG. 1 forming a plurality of reconfigurable modular chambers.

FIG. 3 is a close-up perspective view of the modular food holding system of FIG. 1 in a 2x2 configuration.

FIG. 4 is an exploded perspective view of two chambers of the modular food holding system of FIG. 1, including a master base and an expansion base.

FIG. 5 is a bottom perspective view of one of the chambers of FIG. 4.

FIG. 6 is a top perspective view of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 7 is a front plan view of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 8 is a side plan view of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 9 is a side perspective and exploded view of a heater tunnel of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 10 is a side view of the heater tunnel of FIG. 9.

FIG. 11 is a side perspective view of some internal components of the chamber of FIG. 5, including a printed circuit board.

FIG. 12 is a top view of a printed circuit board of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 13 is a bottom exploded view of a cover and printed circuit board of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 14 is a side exploded view of the cover and heater tunnel of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 15 is a top perspective view of a bottom panel and connector assembly of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 16 is a bottom perspective and exploded view of the cover, heater tunnel, and bottom panel of the chamber of FIG. 5.

FIG. 17 is a top perspective view of a master base of the modular food holding system of FIG. 4.

FIG. 18 is a bottom perspective view of the master base of FIG. 17.

FIG. 19 is a top plan view of the master base of FIG. 17.

FIG. 20 is a side plan view of the master base of FIG. 17.

FIG. 21 is a top perspective and exploded view of a bottom panel and printed circuit board of the master base of FIG. 17.

FIG. 22 is a top plan view of the bottom panel and printed circuit board of FIG. 21.

FIG. 23 is a top perspective view of the master base of FIG. 17 with a top cover removed.

FIG. 24 is a front plan view of the master base of FIG. 17.

FIG. 25 is a top perspective and exploded view of the master base of FIG. 26.

FIG. 26 is a top perspective view of an expansion base of the modular food holding system of FIG. 4.

FIG. 27 is a bottom perspective view of the expansion base of FIG. 26.

FIG. 28 is a top perspective and exploded view of the expansion base of FIG. 26.

FIG. 29 is a side exploded view of the expansion base of FIG. 26.

FIG. 30 is a bottom perspective and exploded view of the expansion base of FIG. 26.

FIG. 31 is a schematic block diagram of the modular food holding system of FIG. 1.

FIG. 32 is a logic flow diagram of an exemplary monitoring method that may be implemented by the modular food holding system of FIG. 1.

FIG. 33 is a logic flow diagram of an exemplary communication method for a central controller connected to the modular food holding system of FIG. 1.

FIG. 34 is a logic flow diagram of an exemplary control method for a central controller connected to the modular food holding system of FIG. 1.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Although the following text sets forth a detailed description of particular embodiments, the legal scope of the invention is defined by the words of the claims set forth at the end of this patent. The detailed description is to be construed as exemplary only and does not describe every possible embodiment, as describing every possible embodiment would be impractical, if not impossible. One could implement numerous alternate embodiments, using either current technology or technology developed after the filing date of this patent, which would still fall within the scope of the claims.

Unless a term is expressly defined in this patent using the sentence "As used herein, the term '_____' is hereby defined to mean . . ." or a similar sentence, there is no intent to limit the meaning of that term, either expressly or by implication, beyond its plain or ordinary meaning, and such term should not be interpreted to be limited in scope based on any statement made in any section of this patent (other than the language of the claims). To the extent that any term recited in the claims at the end of this patent is referred to in this patent in a manner consistent with a single meaning, that is done for sake of clarity only so as to not confuse the reader, and it is not intended that such claim term be limited, by implication or otherwise, to that single meaning. Finally, unless a claim element is defined by reciting the word "means" and a function without the recital of any structure, it is not intended that the scope of any claim element be interpreted based on the application of 35 U.S.C. § 112(f).

As used herein, the term "food holding system" is hereby defined to mean any system that is capable of holding food in a fully or partially prepared state and ready for immediate sale, consumption, or use. The term "food holding system" is further defined to include, without limitation, hot and cold food holding systems, such as, for example, ovens, toasters, radiant heaters, refrigerators, freezers, or any other type of heating or cooling device. Furthermore, the term "food holding system" is also defined to include, without limitation, passive temperature control devices such as insulated compartments.

As used herein, the term "communicatively" is hereby defined to mean that two elements are connected in such a way to enable communications to be passed from one element to another. The term "communicatively" is further defined to include, without limitation, electronic connections, such as wired or wireless connection, mechanical connections, pneumatic connections, hydraulic connection, or any other type of connection that allows communication signals to be passed between elements. The communication signals may include command and control signals, such as instructions, and the communication signals may include data transmissions, such as sensor data.

Turning now to FIG. 1, a modular food holding system 10 is illustrated that is constructed in accordance with the teachings of the disclosure. The modular food holding system 10 comprises a plurality of individual modularized food holding chambers 12. Two or more of the individual modularized food holding chambers 12 may be physically and communicatively connected with one another to form

5

various food holding stations or food holding units **14**. The food holding units **14** may be configured to optimize food holding capacity for a given area in the food preparation area, such as a kitchen **16**. Where more capacity is needed, more individual modularized food holding chambers **12** may be connected together. For example, six individual food holding chambers **12** may be connected to form a 3×2 food holding unit **14a** in a food preparation area. Similarly, four individual food holding chambers **12** may be connected to form a 4×1 food holding unit **14b** near a toaster or to form a 2×2 food holding unit **14c** near a fryer or grill station. Likewise, three individual food holding chambers **12** may be connected to form a 3×1 food holding unit **14d**, **14e**, under a preparation counter or over a fryer or grill, respectively. Along the same lines, two individual food holding chambers **12** may be connected to form a 2×1 food holding unit **14f** above a salt station. Alternatively, a single individual food holding chamber **12** may form a food holding unit **14g**, near a food preparation area. Each of the above identified food holding unit configurations is exemplary only and any number of individual food holding chambers **12** may be connected to form each food holding unit **14**, depending on user needs.

FIG. 2 illustrates additional exemplary configurations for the food holding units **14**, anywhere between 1×1 to 4×4. Again, the configurations illustrated in FIG. 2 are intended to be exemplary only and are not intended to limit the food holding units **14** to the illustrated configurations. Furthermore, the food holding units **14** illustrated in FIG. 2 demonstrate the great flexibility of the food holding system **10** described herein. Some of the advantages to the disclosed food holding system **10** include configuration flexibility (due to the modular nature of the individual food holding chambers), ease of reconfiguration (which will be described further hereinafter), economy of space, and ease of operation.

Each food holding unit **14** includes one or more individual food holding chambers **12** and one or more chamber bases **18**, as illustrated in FIGS. 3-30. Turning more specifically to FIGS. 3 and 4, each chamber base **18** is physically removably connected to one individual food holding chamber **12**. Additionally, the chamber bases **18** may be connected to one another to provide passage of power and/or communication instructions from one chamber base **18** to another chamber base **18** and/or to one or more individual food holding chambers **12**. Each individual food holding chamber **12** includes a chamber housing **20** that includes a chamber cavity **22**. The chamber cavity **22** may be formed as a blind cavity (having a single opening and an end wall), or as a through cavity (having an opening at either end). Regardless, each chamber cavity **22** is sized and shaped to receive a food holding tray **24**. The food holding tray **24** may contain one or more food items that are to be maintained in holding conditions (e.g., temperature, humidity, etc.), until the food item is sold. Each individual food holding chamber **12** may include one or more chamber power and communications ports **28** in the chamber housing **20**. The chamber power and communications ports **28** facilitate transfer of power and communications between individual food holding chambers **12** and/or between an individual food holding chamber **12** and a chamber base **18**. Alternatively, or in addition to the chamber power and communications port **28**, the chamber base **18** may include separate power ports and separate communication ports.

Optionally, one chamber base **18** may function as a master base **18a** and the other chamber bases **18** in a food holding unit **14** may function as expansion bases **18b**. The master

6

base **18a** may include connectivity to a controller of some sort, for example a touch screen controller or other communicatively connected controlling device. The expansion bases **18b** then function as conduits for power and communications from the master base **18a** to individual food holding chambers **12**.

Referring now to FIGS. 5-16, an exemplary food holding chamber **12** includes upstream and downstream connections. “Upstream” and “downstream” in this application are used in the context of the direction of flow of power and/or communications. Generally, power and communication flow first from the master base (e.g., the most upstream component) to the food holding chambers **12** and/or to the expansion bases (e.g., downstream components). Additionally, the food holding chambers **12** are always downstream of a master base **18a** and in some cases may be downstream of an expansion base **18b**, while the expansion bases **18b** are downstream of the master base **18a** and upstream of certain food holding chambers **12** at the same time. Additionally, a particular food holding chamber **12** may be downstream of some food holding chambers **12** and upstream of other food holding chambers **12** in a given configuration.

The upstream and downstream connections are configured in such a way that a downstream food holding chamber **12** automatically connects to the upstream food holding chamber **12** (or to a base **18**) when physically connected forming a food holding unit **14**, as discussed elsewhere herein. In the illustrated embodiment, the downstream connections are disposed in a top surface **29** of the chamber housing **20**, and the upstream connections are disposed in a corresponding location in a bottom surface **31** of the chamber housing **20**. The exemplary upstream and downstream connections include an upstream power and communication connection by an upstream power and communication port **28a** (shown in this embodiment as a MOLEX® BMC connector) and a downstream power and communication connection by a downstream power and communication port **28b** (shown in this embodiment as a MOLEX® BMC connector). While the upstream power and communication port **28a** is illustrated as a male portion of the BMC connector and the downstream power and communication port **28b** is illustrated as a female portion of the BMC connector, the male/female portions could be reversed in other embodiments. Furthermore, other embodiments may include other types of power and communication ports, so long as the port is capable of transmitting power and communication information from one chamber **12** to another chamber and/or from a base **18** to a chamber **12**. In yet other embodiments, the power and communication port may be split into separate power and communication ports.

When a downstream food holding chamber **12** is stacked atop an upstream food holding chamber **12** and moved into place, the upstream connection is inserted into the downstream connection (e.g., the upstream power and communication port **28a** of the upper food holding chamber **12** is joined to the downstream power and communication port **28b** of the lower food holding chamber), thereby connecting the downstream (or upper) food holding chamber **12** to the master base **18** through the upstream (or lower) food holding chamber **12**.

Referring now to FIGS. 17-23, the master base **18a** in the exemplary modular food holding system **10** may include chamber power and communications connections as the chamber power and communications port **32a** (shown in this embodiment as a MOLEX® BMC connector) disposed at a corresponding location in a top surface **40** of a master base housing **42** to connect to a food holding chamber **12**.

Similarly, the master base **18a** in the exemplary modular food holding system **100** may include expansion power and communications connections as the expansion power and communications port **32b** (shown in this embodiment as a MOLEX® BMC connector) disposed at a corresponding location in a side surface **46** of the base housing **42** to connect to an expansion base **18b**. Other embodiments may include other types of power and communication ports, so long as the port is capable of transmitting power and communication information from the master base **18a** to a food holding chamber **12** and/or from the master base **18a** to an expansion base **18b**.

Referring now to FIGS. **26-30**, the expansion base **18b** in the exemplary modular food holding system **10** may include chamber power and communications connections as the chamber power and communications port **52a** (shown in this embodiment as a MOLEX® BMC connector) disposed at a corresponding location in a top surface **65** of an expansion base housing **42** to connect to a food holding chamber **12**. Similarly, the expansion base **18b** in the exemplary modular food holding system **100** may include expansion power and communications connections as the expansion power and communications port **52b** (shown in this embodiment as a MOLEX® BMC connector) disposed at a corresponding location in a first side surface **66** of the base housing **62** to connect to a subsequent expansion base **18b**. The expansion base **18b** also includes a master power and communications connection as the master power and communications port **52c** (shown in this example as a MOLEX® BMC connector) disposed at a corresponding location in a second side surface **68** of the expansion base housing **62**, opposite the first side surface **66**. The master power and communications port **52c** is used to connect the expansion base **18b** to the master base **18a**. Other embodiments may include other types of power and communication ports, so long as the port is capable of transmitting power and communication information from the expansion base **18a** to a food holding chamber **12** and/or from the expansion base **18b** to another expansion base **18b**.

Returning now to FIGS. **5-16**, the food holding chamber **12** will be described in more detail. As discussed above, the food holding chamber **12** includes a chamber housing **20**. A plurality of alignment mechanisms, such as posts **50**, extend from the bottom surface **31** of the chamber housing **20**. The posts **50** are sized and shaped to be received within a complementary alignment mechanism, such as holes **53**, that are formed in the top surface **29** of the chamber housing **20**. When stacking a first food holding chamber **12** on top of a second food holding chamber **12**, the alignment mechanisms center and stabilize the first food holding chamber **12** on top of the second food holding chamber **12** to form a food holding unit **14** (FIGS. **1** and **2**). In the illustrated embodiment, the posts **50** and holes **53** are located near outer corners of the bottom surface **31** and of the top surface **29**, respectively. In other embodiments, the alignment mechanisms may be formed at other locations on the bottom surface **31** and on the top surface **29**. In yet other embodiments, the posts **50** and the holes **53** could be reversed.

Additionally, a plurality of securing mechanisms, such as brackets **54**, extend from the bottom surface **31** of the chamber housing **20**. The brackets **54** are sized and shaped to be received by a plurality of complementary securing mechanisms, such as openings **56** formed in the top surface **29** of the chamber housing **20**. In other embodiments, the brackets **54** and the openings **56** could be reversed.

The posts **50** extend away from the bottom surface **31** a greater distance than the upstream power and communications port **28a**. The posts **50** also extend away from the

bottom surface **31** a greater distance than the brackets **54**. The posts **50** extend farther to ensure proper alignment of the upstream power and communications port **28a** of the first food holding chamber **12** with the downstream power and communications port **28b** of the second food holding chamber **12** when food holding chambers **12** are stacked to form a food holding unit **14**. Because the posts **50** align respective food holding chambers **12** before engagement of the upstream and downstream power and communications ports **28a**, **28b**, damage to the upstream and downstream power and communications ports **28a**, **28b** due to misalignment is reduced or eliminated. Similarly, damage to brackets **54** and the openings **56** due to misalignment is reduced or eliminated. Once the bracket **54** is fully seated within the opening **56**, the two food holding chambers **12** may be further secured to one another by inserting a fastener, such as a screw, through a hole **58** in a surface adjacent to the opening **56** (e.g., a front or side surface of the chamber housing **20**) and into the bracket **54**.

Turning more specifically to FIGS. **9** and **10**, the food holding chamber **12** may include an inner heating compartment **60** located within the chamber housing **20**. The inner heating compartment **60** includes a heated cavity **63** that forms the chamber cavity **22**, which is configured to receive food items and/or is configured to receive a food holding tray **24**. The heated cavity **63** has a heated cavity housing **64** that forms a pass-through opening in the illustrated embodiment. In other embodiments, the heated cavity **63** may form a blind cavity having an end wall and only one opening. A first heating element **67** may be located proximate a top surface of the heated cavity housing **64** and a second heating element **69** may be located proximate a bottom surface of the heated cavity housing **64**. The first and second heating elements **67**, **69** may be conductive heating elements (such as electric heating wires), convective heating elements (such as heated fans), or radiant heating elements (such as infrared heating lamps). In one embodiment, the first heating element is a radiant heating element and the second heating element is a conductive heating element. The first and second heating elements **67**, **69** may be fixed to the heated cavity housing **64** by mechanical fasteners, thermal epoxy, or any other method of securing a heating element to a chamber. The first heating element **67** may be connected to a power source by a first wire **70** and the second heating element may be connected to the power source by a second wire **72**.

Turning now to FIGS. **11-16**, the food holding chamber **12** comprises the inner heating compartment **60**, a printed circuit board (PCB) **70** attached to the inner heating compartment **60**, and an outer shell **73** that receives the inner heating compartment **60** and the PCB **70**. In some embodiments, a display module **74** may also be attached to the inner heating compartment **60** and communicatively connected to the PCB **70**. The PCB **70** may include a first heating element connection **76**, a second heating element connection **78**, and a display module connection **80** for operatively connecting the PCB **70** to the first heating element **67**, to the second heating element **69**, and to the display module **74**, respectively. Operation of the first heating element **67**, the second heating element **69**, and the display module **74** are discussed in more detail below. The PCB **70** is also operatively connected to the upstream power and communication port **28a**, which extends through an opening **82** in the outer shell **72** when assembled. Similarly, the PCB **70** is operatively connected to the downstream power and communication port **28b**.

An open bottom of the outer shell **72** is covered by a bottom panel **84**. The bottom panel **84** includes a power

safety adapter **86**. The power safety adapter **86** is connected to the upstream power and communications port **28a**. The power safety adapter **86** prevents power being transferred into the PCB **70** unless the power safety adapter **86** is fully connected to a downstream power and communications port **28b** of another food holding chamber, a downstream power and communications port **32a** of a master base **18a**, or a power and communications port **52a** of an expansion base **18b**.

Returning now to FIGS. **17-25**, the master base **18a** may include alignment mechanisms, such as holes **153** that receive the posts **50** of the food holding chambers **12** when a food holding chamber **12** is stacked upon the master base **18a**. Similarly, the master base **18a** may include securing mechanisms, such as openings **156** that receive the brackets **54** of the food holding chambers **12** when a food holding chamber **12** is stacked upon the master base **18a**. Similar to the food holding chambers **12**, the master base **18a** includes a PCB **170** that is operatively connected to the power and communications ports **32a**, **32b**.

Returning now to FIGS. **26-30**, the expansion base **18b** may include alignment mechanisms, such as holes **253** that receive the posts **50** of the food holding chambers **12** when a food holding chamber **12** is stacked upon the expansion base **18b**. Similarly, the expansion base **18a** may include securing mechanisms, such as openings **256** that receive the brackets **54** of the food holding chambers **12** when a food holding chamber **12** is stacked upon the expansion base **18b**. Similar to the food holding chambers **12**, the expansion base **18b** includes a PCB **270** that is operatively connected to the power and communications ports **52a**, **52b**, **52c**.

FIG. **31** illustrates a schematic block diagram of an exemplary modular food holding system **500** and an exemplary central controller **510**. In some embodiments, the modular food holding system **500** may include the central controller **510**. In alternative embodiments, the modular food holding system **500** and the central controller **510** may be separate systems or devices, communicating by a communication connection **530**. The modular food holding system **500** may be a system of individual modularized food holding chambers **560**, which may be configured to store perishable food items. Such food holding chambers **560** may comprise individual food holding chambers **12** (FIG. **1**), as discussed elsewhere herein. The food holding chambers **560** may be connected to other food holding chambers **560**, a master base **540** (which may be a master base **18a**), or one or more expansion bases **540A** (which may be an expansion base **18b**) (collectively referred to as the “components” of the modular food holding system **500**, together with their sub-components disposed within any of the components). The connections between the components of the modular food holding system **500** may include a power connection **544** and a communication connection **546**, which connect every food holding chamber **560** and every expansion base **540A** to the master base **540**. As illustrated in FIG. **31**, additional food holding chambers **560** may be connected to any of the food holding chambers **560**, and additional expansion bases **540A** may be connected to the expansion bases **540A**. In a preferred embodiment, however, only one master base **540** provides power and control commands from the central controller **510** to each food holding chambers **560**, either directly or indirectly. Additionally, or alternatively, the master base **540** may be incorporated within one of the food holding chambers **560** in some embodiments.

The master base **540** forms the center of the power and communication network of the modular food holding system

500 and also serves as a communicative link to the central controller **510**. A power source **550** is connected to the master base **540**, which may either transform the power received or pass through the power without conversion. For example, the power source may be a 110V or 240V A/C source, which the master base **540** may convert to 12V D/C to power the food holding chambers **560**. The master base **540** includes connections to provide power and communications to at least one expansion base **540A** and at least one food holding chamber **560** directly via the power connection **544** and the communication connection **546**. As noted, additional expansion bases **540A** or food holding chambers **560** may be indirectly connected to the master base **540**. The power connections **544** may include grounded, ungrounded, regulated, unregulated, single-phase, multiphase, direct, alternating current, or any other type power connection known or here-after developed. The communication connections **546** may include wired or wireless, analog or digital, addressable, mesh, single-wire, twisted pair, multi-conductor, cable, electrical, optical, or any other type of communication connection known or here-after developed. In some embodiments, multiple power connections **544** providing different power levels (e.g., 110V A/C and 12V DC) or multiple communication connections **546** providing different communication channels may be included between each pair of components of the modular food system **500**.

In some embodiments, the master base **540** may further include a communication unit **542** configured to facilitate communication with the central controller **510** via the communication link **530**. When present, the communication unit **542** receives data from the food holding chambers **560** via the communication connections **546**, transmits the data to the central controller **510** via the communication link **530**, receives control data from the central controller **510** via the communication link **530**, and transmits the control data to the food holding chambers **560** via the communication connections **546**. The data received from the food holding chambers **560** may include data received from elements disposed therein, including sensors **564**, heating elements **566**, fans **568**, or displays **570**. The communication link **530** may include a cord, a wireless connection, or a direct connection between a plug of the central controller and a socket of the master base. The communication link **530** may further include any known or hereafter developed wired or wireless electronic data communication medium or protocol, including wireless telephony (e.g., GSM, CDMA, LTE, etc.), Wi-Fi (802.11 standards), WiMAX, Bluetooth, Fieldbus (e.g., HART®, WirelessHART®, FOUNDATION® Fieldbus, etc.), or NFC protocols. In some embodiments, the communication link **530** may include an indirect link through a network, such as through one or more routers of a LAN or WAN. In some embodiments, the communication unit **542** may process the received communications to convert the received data or control data from one communication protocol into another communication protocol. In embodiments without a communication unit **542**, the central controller **510** may be directly connected to the communication connections **546** through the communication link **530**. In such embodiments, the communication link **530** may further be a wired communication link of the same type as the communication connections **546**.

In further embodiments, the central controller **510** may be incorporated within the master base **540**. In such embodiments, a communication unit **542** may be unnecessary, as the communication module **520** may communicate directly with the food holding chambers **560** via the communication connections **546**. The central controller **510** in the master

base **540** may receive data from food holding chambers **560**, such as data indicating the configuration, operating state, connected devices (such as sensors, timers, fans, heaters, etc.), or user input (such as from a screen, switch, or button disposed within the food holding chamber **560**). The central controller **510** within the master base **540** may provide control data to the food holding units **560**. In particularly preferred embodiments, the central controller **510** may communicate control actions or control commands to the unit controllers **562** of the food holding chambers **560**. Such control actions or commands may include control parameters, such as set points or ranges for operation. For example, the central controller **510** may communicate set points for temperature and humidity to the unit controller **562** of a food holding chamber **560**, which may cause the unit controller **562** to operate elements or components of the food holding chamber **560** (e.g., heating elements, cooling elements, fans, sprayers, etc.) to maintain temperature and humidity at or near the set points received from the central controller **510**. In some embodiments, such machine-level actuation of components or elements within the food holding chamber **560** by the unit controller **562** may occur without communication between the food holding unit **560** and the master base **540** or the central controller **510**. For example, the unit controller **562** may receive sensor data regarding temperature, determine an adjustment to a heating element based upon set points or operating parameters previously received from the central controller **510**, and control the operation of the heating element without further communication with the central controller **510**. By providing operating parameters or set points to the unit controller **562** for operation of the components of the food holding chamber **560**, the volume of data required to be communicated between the food holding chambers **560** and the central controller **510** may be significantly reduced. This may further permit control of a greater number of food holding chambers **560** by the central controller **510** or may permit communication through a lower-bandwidth communication protocol or connection.

One or more expansion bases **540A** may be connected to the master base **540** through the power connections **544** and communication connections **546**. Expansion bases **540A** may similarly connect to additional expansion bases **540A** through the power connections **544** and communication connections **546**, thereby indirectly connecting the additional expansion bases **540A** to the master base **540** (and, thereby, to the central controller **510** and the power source **550**). Together with the master base **540**, the expansion bases **540A** may be referred to herein as the “bases.” Each expansion base **540A** simply serves to connect the master base **540** to additional expansion bases **540A** or food holding chambers **560** allowing extension of the system in a modular fashion. In some embodiments, one or more expansion bases **540A** may further be connected to a power source, either optionally or as a requirement of proper functioning. Such additional power source connections to the expansion bases **540A** could be used to eliminate the power connections **544** between the expansion base **540A** and other bases. In such embodiments, the communication connection **546** may be wireless connections, thereby eliminating the need for any physical connection between bases and allowing further extension of the modular food holding system **500**. For wireless communication, the expansion bases **540A** may further include communication units similar to **542** to transmit and receive data.

Each food holding chamber **560** is communicatively connected to the master base **540**, either directly or indi-

rectly through expansion bases **540A** or other food holding chambers **560**. The food holding chambers **560** may be identical modules, configured and connected as discussed elsewhere herein. Each food holding chamber **560** may include multiple power connections **544** and communication connections **546**. The multiple connections may include an upstream connection and a downstream connection for each of the power connection **544** and communication connections **546**. The upstream connections connect the food holding chamber **560** to the master base **540**, either directly or through another food holding chamber **560** or an expansion base **540A**. The downstream connections allow additional food holding chambers **560** to connect to the master base **540** through the food holding chamber **560**.

The food holding chambers **560** may contain various combinations of elements or components, including sensors **564**, heating elements **566**, fans **568**, or displays **570**. These elements of the food holding chambers **560** may be permanently or removably disposed within or connected to the food holding chambers **560**. Additionally, the elements may be directly connected to the power connections **544** or communication connections **546**, or they may be indirectly connected thereto by a unit controller **562**. The elements may be controlled by or based upon control commands from the unit controller **562** and/or the central controller **510** to adjust the physical environment within the food holding chamber **560** (e.g., using a heating element **566**, a fan **568**, a cooling element (not shown), or a toasting element (not shown)), generate data associated with the food holding chamber **560** (e.g., using a sensor **564**), present information regarding the food holding chamber **560** (e.g., using a display **570**), or take other actions.

The one or more sensors **564** may include devices for generating or collecting data associated with some aspect of a food holding chamber **560**, including thermometers, humidistats, scales, position sensors, photosensors, user-operated or automatic switches, buttons, dials, or other similar devices. The sensors **564** may be configured to measure or generate data regarding the environment within the food holding chamber **560**, such as temperature, humidity, volatility, or load status (e.g., contents type, weight, whether empty or loaded, etc.). In some embodiments, such sensor data may be collected and analyzed by a unit controller **562** in the food holding chamber **560**.

In some embodiments, the sensors **564** may include smart sensors that sense characteristics of the environment within the food holding chamber **560**. For example, the sensors **564** may comprise humidity sensors, electronic nose sensors that are capable of detecting food decomposition products (e.g., sulphur, amines, aldehydes, ethanol, ethylene, metal oxides, etc. by using gas chromatography, mass spectrometry and/or olfactometry) to determine the freshness of the food items stored within the food holding chamber **560**, temperature sensors that directly measure the temperature of the environment within the food holding chamber **560**, and load sensors that detect the presence of food items within the food holding chamber **560**. The sensors **564** may be located anywhere in or around the food holding chamber **560**, as long as the sensor is capable of directly measuring a characteristic of the environment within the food holding chamber **560** (e.g., within a headspace of a food holding tray). For example, the sensors **564** may be located underneath a cover of a food pan that is located within the food holding chamber **560**, or built into a food pan itself that is located within the food holding chamber **560** (e.g., the sensor **564** may be mounted in a handle of the food pan and in fluid/gaseous communication with pan contents via a hole in the pan). The

sensors **564** may transmit sensed data to the chamber base by a wired connection or by a wireless connection. The load sensors may comprise one or more of load cells, sonar detectors, and cameras.

The sensors **564** allow food stored within the food holding chamber **560** to be stored in a stasis mode, which prevents further cooking of the food while inhibiting bacterial growth. Generally, food has to be stored at less than 40° F. or greater than 140° F. (which is commonly referred to as a food safe zone, and which may be defined in the NSF as a minimum food safety temperature) to prevent rapid bacterial growth and or to minimize microbial growth. Additionally, the sensors **564** may communicate with a display and the display may display a symbolic representation of the quality of food that is stored within the food holding chamber based on information received from the sensor. For example, the display may include color coded quality indications (e.g., green, yellow, red) that are based on the decomposition products detected in the food holding chamber.

The one or more heating elements **566** may include metal, ceramic, composite, or other heating elements for heating or cooling the interior of the food holding module **560**. The one or more fans **568** may include axial fans, centrifugal fans, cross-flow fans, bellows, or other means of venting or circulating air within the food holding module **560**. The one or more displays **570** may include LCD display screens, touch screen displays, LED displays, indicator lights, or other information display devices. Additionally, or alternatively, other types of elements may be included in one or more of the food holding chambers **560**, such as speakers, sirens, buzzers, etc.

Some or all food holding chambers **560** may include unit controllers **562**, in some embodiments, which may be connected to the power connections **544** and communication connections **546** of the food holding chambers **560**. The unit controller **562** may receive control communications from the central controller **510** and operate one or more elements disposed within the food holding chamber **560**. Operation of the one or more elements disposed within the food holding module **560** by the unit controller **562** may occur with or without communication between the unit controller **562** and the master base **540**. With such communication, for example, a control command to reduce power to a heating element **566** to decrease temperature in a food holding chamber **560** may be received at the unit controller **562**, which may control the power received by the heating element **566**. In response to receiving the control command, the unit controller **562** may reduce the power received by the heating element **566**. Without such communication, however, the unit controller **562** may receive sensor data regarding temperature, determine whether to increase or decrease temperature in the food holding chamber **560** based upon a target temperature (e.g., a temperature parameter or set point), determine a corresponding increase or decrease in power to the heating element **566**, and cause the power supplied to the heating element to be adjusted accordingly. Although operation of the one or more elements of the food holding chamber **560** may not involve communication between the unit controller **562** and the master base **540**, the unit controller **562** may be received from the central controller **510** of or through the master base **540**.

In a similar manner, the unit controller **562** may control a sensor **564**, a fan **568**, a display **570**, or other elements or components of the food holding chamber **560** (including elements or components of a food holding tray **24**). In some embodiments, the unit controller **562** may communicate data regarding the food holding module **560** through the

upstream communication connection **546** and the master base **540** to the central controller **510** via the communication link **530**. Such data may indicate the location or configuration of the food holding module **560**. The central controller **510** may use this data to determine a configuration or arrangement of the one or more food holding chambers **560** of the modular food holding system **500**. The central controller **510** may further provide control commands, control actions, operating parameters, or set points to the unit controller **562**.

Although the food holding chambers **560** may include a variety of electrical or electronic elements, including those discussed above, the elements may be limited in some embodiments for reliability or cost. In some embodiments, therefore, the electrical elements may include only one or more of the following elements (plus the necessary wiring or other connections for the power connections **544** and the communication connections **546**): a timer switch, a heating element, a fan, or an indicator light. In additional embodiments, the limited electrical elements may further include one or more unit controllers **562**. In further embodiments, the electrical elements of the food holding chambers **560** may include any one or more elements or components for sensing or adjusting one or more aspects of the environment within the food holding chambers **560**, but the unit controller **562** of each food holding chamber **562** may be configured to require operating parameters, set points, or control commands from the central controller **510**.

As discussed above, the master base **540** may be communicatively connected to the central controller **510** by the communication link **530**, or the central controller **510** may be incorporated within the master base **540**. The central controller **510** may be a general- or special-purpose computing device, such as a desktop computer, notebook computer, tablet computer, smart phone, other mobile device, or wearable computing device. In some embodiments, the central controller **510** may be configured to physically connect to a socket or plug of the master base **540**, such that the central controller **510** forms a fixed or adjustable part of the modular food holding system **500**. In other embodiments, the central controller **510** may be wired to or wirelessly connected to the master base **540**. Through the master base **540**, the central controller **510** receives data from and transmits data to the one or more food holding chambers **560** of the modular food holding system **500**, such as configuration information or operating parameters. In some embodiments, the central controller **510** may be mounted at a fixed location with respect to the modular food holding system **500**, such as on top of one or more food holding chambers **560**, hanging below one or more bases, etc. In alternative embodiments where the central controller **510** is wirelessly connected to the master base **540**, a storage slot (not shown) may further be provided to hold the central controller **510** when not in use.

The central controller **510** may include a display **512** for presenting information to an operator. In some embodiments, the display may be a touch screen display, configured to receive input from the operator. In further embodiments, the central controller **510** may include an input device, such as a keyboard, mouse, microphone, or touch pad. The central controller **510** may further include one or more processors **514** to receive, process, generate, determine, transmit, and store data. The one or more processors of the central controller **510** may access a random access memory (RAM) and a memory **516** for storing an operating system, software programs, applications, routines, scripts, or other data. The memory **516** may be a non-transitory computer readable

memory, storing instructions executed by the one or more processors **514**. In some embodiments, the central controller **510** may also include, or otherwise be communicatively connected to, other data storage mechanisms (e.g., one or more hard disk drives, optical storage drives, solid state storage devices, etc.) that reside within the central controller **510** or are connected thereto via a computer network. Moreover, in thin-client implementations, additional processing and data storage may be provided by one or more servers (not shown) connected via a network.

In some embodiments, the central controller **510** may further include a communication module **520** for communicating with the communication unit **542** of the master base **540** or directly with the food holding chambers **560** via the communication link **530** and the communication connections **546**. The communication module **520** may further transmit and receive wired or wireless communications with the master base **510** or external devices (not shown), using any suitable wireless communication protocol network, such as a wireless telephony network (e.g., GSM, CDMA, LTE, etc.), a Wi-Fi network (802.11 standards), a WiMAX network, a Bluetooth network, etc. Additionally, or alternatively, the communication module **520** may also be capable of communicating using a near field communication standard (e.g., ISO/IEC 18092, standards provided by the NFC Forum, etc.) The components of the central controller **510** (including the display **512**, processor **514**, memory **516**, RAM **518**, and communication component **520**) may be interconnected via an address/data bus or other means.

In some embodiments, the communication module **520** may be configured to facilitate communication between multiple central controllers **510**. In further embodiments, the communication module **520** may be configured to receive data from a static or dynamic data source configured by another central controller **510**. For example, a desktop or laptop computer may be used as a first central controller **510** to configure operating parameters for the food holding chambers **560** of the modular food holding system **500**, and information related to such configuration of the operating parameters of the food holding chambers **560** may be transferred to a second central controller **510** for communication and implementation within the modular food holding system **500**. Such second central controller **510** may include a central controller **510** incorporated within the master base **540**, which may receive the configuration information via the communication module **520**. In some embodiments, such transfer of configuration information may include uploading the information from the first central controller **510** to a storage device (e.g., a flash memory drive, a USB memory device, or a network drive), then downloading the configuration information to the second central controller **510** from the storage device. In some such embodiments, the second central controller **510** incorporated within the master base **540** may omit the display **512** or have only limited display functionality.

In further embodiments, multiple central controllers **510** may be connected to the master base **540** through one or more communication links **530**. This may allow multiple devices or operators to simultaneously control the modular food holding system **500**. In further embodiments, multiple modular food holding systems **500** may be communicatively connected to one or more central controllers **510** through one or more communication links **530** to the master bases **540** of each modular food holding system **500**. For example, a commercial kitchen may have several modular food holding systems **500** positioned at different locations in the kitchen, each of which includes a master base **540** and one

or more food holding chambers **560**. Each master base **540** may be physically or wireless connected to a central controller **510** dedicated to control of the modular food holding system **500** corresponding to the particular master base **540**. Additionally, some or all of the master bases **540** may further be communicatively connected to an additional central controller **510**. Such additional central controllers **510** may also be configured to control only one modular food holding system **500** or may instead be configured to control a plurality of modular food holding systems **500**. The former configuration may allow multiple central controllers **510**, such as those positioned at opposite ends of a long row of food holding chambers **560** for easy access by one or more operators. The latter configuration may allow a central operator to monitor or control multiple modular food holding systems **500** located around the kitchen from a central location, such as a manager's office.

FIG. **32** illustrates a flow diagram of an exemplary monitoring method **600** for monitoring a modular food holding system **500** (FIG. **31**). The modular food holding system **500** may implement this method to monitor and control the one or more food holding chambers **560** in conjunction with one or more central controllers **510**. The method **600** may begin by connecting one or more food holding chambers **560** to the master base **540**, either directly or indirectly, at block **602**. The master base **540** may then be communicatively connected to the central controller **510** at block **604**. Until operation of the modular food holding system **500** is determined to be complete at block **612**, the method **600** may then continue to communicate data and control the operation of one or more elements within the one or more food holding chambers **560**. The one or more food holding chambers **560** may communicate data to the central controller **510** via the master base **540** at block **606**. The one or more food holding chambers **560** may then receive control commands from the central controller **510** via the master base **540** at block **608** and may implement the control commands at block **610**. Once operation of the modular food holding system **500** is determined to be complete at block **612**, the method **600** may terminate.

At block **602**, the method **600** may begin with the connection of one or more food holding chambers **560** to the master base **540**. As discussed above, the food holding chambers **560** may be connected to the master base **540** via power connections **544** and communication connections **546** through one or more other food holding chambers **560** or expansion bases **540A**.

At block **604**, the master base **540** may be connected to the central controller **510**. This connection may be made by a wired or wireless connection via the communication link **530**. The connection may be established by either the central controller **510** or the master base **540** in various embodiments. In some embodiments, the central controller **510** may establish a communicative connection with the one or more food holding chambers **560** through the master base **540**, such as by polling the unit controllers **562** of the food holding chambers **560** to determine the configuration or arrangement of the modular food holding system **500**. As discussed above, the master base **540** may include a central controller **510**, in which case the communication connection may be to a further central controller **510** having the same or additional functionality.

At block **606**, the master base **540** may communicate data regarding the one or more food holding chambers **560** to the central controller **510** through the communication link **530**. In some embodiments, the one or more food holding modules **560** may generate and communicate the data directly

17

through the master base **540**. In other embodiments, the master base **540** may receive and convert data from the one or more food holding chambers **560** prior to transmitting the data to the central controller **510**. The data may include information regarding the temperature, humidity, heat source location, or sensor data from one or more sensors **564** disposed within the one or more food holding chambers **560**, as well as other information regarding the one or more food holding chambers **560**. In further embodiments, the data may indicate the position, configuration, location, or arrangement of the one or more food holding chambers **560** within the modular food holding system **500**. In yet further embodiments, the data may include information regarding general operating configurations of the one or more food holding chambers **560**, such as operating parameters, operating status (e.g., whether the food holding chamber **560** has been turned on, is operating correctly, etc.), or a code identifying one of a plurality of pre-set operating modes (including a plurality of operating parameters or set points). In embodiments wherein the master base **540** includes a central controller **510**, the data may be received from the food holding chambers **560** by the central controller **510** within the master base **540**. The central controller **510** within the master base **540** may then determine whether to further communicate the data to an external central controller **510** or to perform control functions within the master base **540**.

At block **608**, the one or more food holding chambers **560** may receive one or more control commands from the central controller **510**. The control commands may be generated by the central controller **510** and transmitted via the communication link **530** through or from the master base **540** to the one or more food holding chambers **560**. Where applicable, the control commands may be received at the unit controllers **562** of one or more food holding chambers **560**. Additionally, or alternatively, the control commands may be received by the elements disposed within the one or more food holding chambers **560** (e.g., sensors **564**, heating elements **566**, fans **568**, displays **570**, or other elements). Where the control commands are received by the unit controllers **562**, the control commands may include element operation commands (directly controlling components or elements disposed within the food holding chambers **560**) or operating parameters (establishing set points, targets, ranges, or conditions for the unit controllers **562** to use in operating the components or elements disposed within the food holding chambers **560**).

At block **610**, the one or more food holding chambers **560** may implement the received control commands. Implementation of the control commands may include taking one or more of the following actions using one or more elements disposed within the one or more food holding chambers **560**: presenting an alert, illuminating an indicator light, displaying a countdown, controlling the temperature, or controlling the humidity. In some embodiments, the actions may be controlled by the unit controller **562** in response to receiving one or more control commands. In particularly preferred embodiments, the unit controller **562** will operate the food holding chamber **560** to adjust the environment within the food holding chamber **560** (e.g., temperature, humidity, etc.) using one or more electrical components or elements of the food holding chamber **560** based upon operating parameters or set points received from the central controller **510** as control commands.

At block **612**, the method **600** may determine whether operation of the modular food holding system **500** is complete. Determining whether operation is complete may include receiving a signal indicating further operation or

18

discontinuance of operation from the central controller **510**. This may include a determination to terminate operation based upon expiration of a timer or due to an emergency shut-down condition being reached. Alternatively, determining whether operation is complete may include continuing operation until power is switched off or the power source **550** is removed. When operation is not complete, the method **600** may continue with communicating further data regarding the one or more food holding chambers **560** at block **606**. When operation is determined to be complete, the method **600** may terminate.

FIG. **33** illustrates a flow diagram of an exemplary communication method **700** for a central controller **510** connected to a modular food holding system **500**. The method **700** may be implemented by one or more central controllers **510** to monitor one or more modular food holding systems **500**. The method **700** may begin by establishing a communicative connection between the central controller **510** and the master base **540** of the modular food holding system **500** at block **702**. Once the connection is established, the central controller **510** may receive data from one or more food holding chambers **560** through the communicative connection at block **704**. Based upon the received data, the central controller **510** may then determine an arrangement of the one or more food holding chambers **560** of the modular food holding system **500** at block **706**. The central controller **510** may further determine additional information regarding the one or more food holding chambers **560** at block **708**. Then the determined arrangement or other information may be presented to a user at block **710**. The method **700** may then end, or the central controller **510** may continue to receive data, determine arrangement or other information regarding the one or more food holding chambers **560**, and present the information to the user while the modular food holding system **500** is in operation.

At block **702**, the method **700** may begin with establishing the communicative connection between the central controller **510** and the modular food holding system **500** through the master base **540**. The connection may be established by either the controller **510** or the master base **540**. In some embodiments, the controller **510** or the master base **540** may automatically attempt to establish a connection when powered up or when no connections are found. In other embodiments, the user may direct the central controller **510** or the master base **540** to establish the communicative connection. The communicative connection may be established through the communication link **530**, which may be wired or wireless, as well as direct or indirect, as further discussed above.

At block **704**, the central controller **510** may receive data from the one or more food holding chambers **560** of the modular food holding system **500**. The data may be received via the communicative connection over the communication link **530**. As discussed elsewhere herein, the central controller **510** receives the data through the master base **540**, which is further directly or indirectly connected to the one or more food holding chambers **560**. The data may include data from one or more sensors **564** disposed within the one or more food holding chambers **560**, which sensor data may indicate environmental conditions within the one or more food holding chambers **560**. Additionally, or alternatively, the data may include data from unit controllers **562**, indicating the arrangement, operating status, operating parameters, or capabilities of the food holding chambers **560**. The data may include information regarding the temperature, humidity, heat source location, or other information regarding the one or more food holding chambers **560**. Additionally, or alternatively, the data may indicate the position,

19

configuration, location, or arrangement of the one or more food holding chambers 560 within the modular food holding system 500.

At block 706, the central controller 510 may determine a physical arrangement of the one or more food holding chambers 560 based upon the data received at block 704. This may include determining whether any expansion bases 540A are connected to the master base 540, as well as determining how many food holding chambers 560 are connected to each base. In some embodiments, this may further include determining configuration information for one or more of the food holding chambers 560, such as a model or serial number of the food holding chambers 560. This configuration information may also include information regarding whether the food holding chamber 560 includes a unit controller 562 or includes one or more elements disposed within the food holding chamber 560 (e.g., sensors 564, heating elements 566, fans 568, or displays 570). Several exemplary physical arrangements of the food holding chambers 560 in a modular food holding system are illustrated in FIGS. 1 and 2.

At block 708, the central controller 510 may determine additional information regarding the one or more food holding chambers 560 based upon the data received at block 704. The additional information may include the configuration information described above or other information regarding the food holding chambers 560 or their current state. Such additional information may include environmental condition information (e.g., temperature, humidity, etc.), unit content information (e.g., type or quantity of food contents, duration of operation, time elapsed since last open, time elapsed since contents placed in unit, time remaining until contents expire, etc.), operational status (e.g., powered, unpowered, operational, malfunctioning, etc.), or other information regarding the food holding chambers 560 or their contents. In some embodiments, this additional information may include operating parameters, operating status, or similar information regarding the operation of the food holding chamber 560 by the associated unit controller 562. The additional information may further be determined in part based upon additional data entered by the user, stored in the memory 516 of the central controller 510, or accessed by the central controller 510 (e.g., from a local or remote database connected via a network). In some embodiments, the additional information may include one or more control options to be presented to the user, which control options may be associated with control commands to control the actions of elements of the food holding chambers 560, as described further elsewhere herein.

At block 710, the central controller 510 may present, or cause to be presented, information regarding the modular food holding system 500 to the user. This may include presenting some or all of the arrangement information determined at block 706 and the additional information determined at block 708 regarding the one or more food holding chambers 560. For example, the information regarding the physical arrangement of the food holding chambers 560 may be presented by displaying a representation (e.g., a box or icon) of each food holding chamber 560 on the display 512, arranged to represent the physical location of each unit within the modular food holding system 500. Information regarding the operation or contents of each food holding chamber 560 may similarly be presented using icons, text, colors, shapes, or other means on the display 512. In some embodiments, the additional information may be presented in multiple screens or windows, in a drill-down fashion, using pop-up boxes, or in other configurations that

20

allow the user to view information regarding all or only part of the modular food holding system 500. For example, the central controller 510 may present the arrangement of all the food holding chambers 560 to the user, but may present more detailed information about a particular food holding chamber 560 in a different screen upon user selection of the particular food holding chamber 560.

FIG. 34 illustrates a flow diagram of an exemplary control method 800 for a central controller 510 connected to a modular food holding system 500. The method 800 may be used in connection with or alternatively to method 700 discussed above, and some aspects of each may be incorporated in the other. Like the method 700, the method 800 may be implemented by a central controller 510 communicatively connected to a modular food holding system 500 via a communication link 530. The method 800 may begin at block 802 by receiving data from one or more food holding chambers 560. Based upon the received data, one or more control options may be determined at block 804 and presented to a user at block 806. Upon receiving a user selection of one or more control options at block 808, the central controller 510 may determine one or more control actions based upon the received selection at block 810. Depending upon a determination at block 812 of whether the determined control actions require communication to the food holding chambers 560, the central controller 510 may implement the control actions at block 814 or generate a control command at block 816 and transmit the control command to the food holding chambers 560 at block 818. The central controller 510 may further present, or cause to be presented, information regarding the one or more control actions to the user at block 820. The method 800 may repeat until operation of the modular food holding system 500 is determined to be complete at block 822, at which point the method 800 may terminate.

At block 802, the central controller 510 may receive data from one or more food holding chambers 560 through the master base 540 and the communicative connection over the communication link 530. In some embodiments, this may include establishing a communicative connection between the central controller 510 and the master base 540, as discussed above. In further embodiments, the central controller 510 may be incorporated within the master base 540, in which case the data may be received by the central controller 510 of the master base 540. As discussed further elsewhere herein, the data received by the central controller 510 may include data from one or more sensors 564 disposed within the food holding chambers 560, data regarding environmental conditions within the food holding chambers 560 (e.g., temperature, humidity, heat source location, ventilation, etc.), data regarding configuration of the food holding chambers 560 (e.g., elements disposed within the units, operation of the elements, arrangement of the units, etc.), operational status of the food holding chambers 560 (e.g., powered, unpowered, ready, operational, malfunctioning, etc.), operating parameters of the food holding chambers 560 (e.g., temperature, humidity, load, or duration set points), or data regarding food contents of the food holding chambers 560 (e.g., type or quantity of food contents, duration of operation, time elapsed since last open, time elapsed since contents placed in unit, time remaining until contents expire, etc.).

At block 804, the central controller 510 may determine one or more control options associated with the one or more food holding chambers 560 based upon the data received at block 802. The one or more control options may be associated with control actions that may directly or indirectly

affect the operation or control of the one or more food holding chambers 560. Direct operational control may include causing an element disposed within a food holding chamber 560 to start, stop, increase, or decrease operation in order to achieve a change to environmental conditions within the food holding chamber 560. Indirect operational control may include providing or adjusting an operating parameter used by the unit controller 562 of a food holding chamber 560 to adjust environmental conditions within the food holding chamber 560. The control options may also allow the user to view or access additional information regarding some or all of the food holding chambers 560. In some embodiments, the control options may further include options to connect to or disconnect from one or more additional modular food holding systems 500, retrieve historical operating data, access troubleshooting information, send information to another user, request information from another user, or perform or schedule maintenance on the modular food holding system 500. In further embodiments, the central controller 510 may determine to present only a subset of the set of all available control options to the user, which subset may be based upon a user role or access level. Additionally, or alternatively, control options not presented may be accessible by the user through one or more menus in some embodiments.

At block 806, the central controller 510 may cause the one or more control options to be presented to the user. The one or more control options may be presented using the display 512 of the central controller 510. Additionally, or alternatively, other means of presenting the options to the user may be used in some embodiments, such as the display 570 of one or more food holding chambers 560 or other displays. In some instances, one or more of the control options may be suggested or recommended to the user, such as a control option setting a timer for a food holding chamber 560 based upon data indicating that new food content was recently placed in the food holding chamber 560. Where one or more of the determined control options is critical or time sensitive, the central controller 510 may further alert the user to the control options by also presenting an alert or alarm.

At block 808, the central controller 510 may receive a selection from the user of one or more control options. For example, the user may select an option to change a group of operating parameters associated with one or more of the food holding chambers 560 in order to adjust the environment and operations of the food holding chambers 560 to receive different food (e.g., when changing between an arrangement configured for breakfast foods and an arrangement configured for lunch foods). The selection may be received by an input device of the central controller 510. In a preferred embodiment, the input device may be combined with the display 512 as a touch screen display. Such embodiment offers the advantages of simplicity, flexibility in the input configuration, and efficient space usage. Other input devices may be used in addition to, or as alternatives to, a touch screen, including buttons, keyboards, keypads, of other known or later-developed input devices. In some embodiments, the central controller 510 may receive an indirect user selection in the form of data received from one or more food holding chambers 560. For example, the user may remove a holding bin from a food holding chamber 560, thereby indicating to the central controller 510 that food contents have been removed or discarded or that the heating elements of the food holding chamber 560 should be turned off. The user may similarly interact with a display 570, button, switch, or other element of a food holding chamber 560 to select a control option in some embodiments.

At block 810, the central controller 510 may determine one or more control actions to be taken based upon the user selection of one or more control options received at block 808. The control actions may relate to the direct or indirect control of one or more of the food holding chambers 560, as discussed herein. Some control actions may involve direct or indirect adjustments to the operation of one or more elements of a food holding chamber 560, such as controlling the speed of a fan 568 or adjusting a set point for humidity within the food holding chamber 560. Other control actions may be implemented to provide information to the user for use in operating the modular food holding system 500, such as setting a timer to alert the user when the contents of a food holding container have expired or setting an alarm to sound when a food holding chamber 560 has reached a desired temperature. The control actions may include one or more of the following: setting a timer, presenting an alert, illuminating an indicator light, displaying a countdown, presenting an option to select a type of food stored within the one or more food holding chambers 560, controlling the temperature within the one or more food holding chambers 560, controlling the humidity within the one or more food holding chambers 560, configuring operating parameters or set points of the one or more food holding chambers 560, or otherwise configuring the one or more food holding chambers 560. Thus, the determined control actions may include actions to be implemented at a food holding chamber 560 or at the central controller 510. Similarly, the determined control actions to be implemented at the food holding chamber 560 may include control actions that directly operate the components or elements disposed therein (e.g., heating elements, fans, etc.) or control actions that control the operation of the unit controller 562 disposed therein to control the components or elements (e.g., adjusting a temperature set point, setting a target humidity level, etc.).

At block 812, the central controller 510 may determine whether each control action determined at block 810 requires communication to the food holding chambers 560. For example, control actions involving configuration of the unit controller 562 or operation of a heating element 566, a fan 568, a display 570, or another element disposed within a food holding chamber 560 will require communication to the food holding chamber 560 of a control command. Control actions involving providing information, setting a timer, presenting an alert, or similar actions occurring on the central controller 510 may not require communication from the central controller 510 to any food holding chambers 560.

When the central controller 510 determines at block 812 that no communication to the food holding chambers 560 through the master base 540 is required to implement the one or more control actions, the central controller 510 may implement the one or more control actions at block 814. This may include determining additional information, presenting additional information to the user, requesting additional information from the user, or communicating with another central controller 510 or another user to assist the user in operating the modular food holding system 500. In some instances, this may include monitoring future data received at the central controller 510 from the one or more food holding modules 560 to determine when a condition is met or ceases to be met, in which case further actions may be taken by the central controller 510. Such further actions may be implemented at the central controller 510 or may require communication of control commands to one or more food holding chambers 560 at that later time.

When the central controller 510 determines at block 812 that communication to the food holding chambers 560

through the master base **540** is required to implement the one or more control actions, the central controller **510** may generate one or more control commands to one or more food holding chambers **560** at block **816**. The one or more control commands may include instructions that cause a unit controller **562**, sensor **564**, heating element **566**, fan **568**, display **570**, or other element disposed within a food holding chamber **560** to adjust its operation, as discussed elsewhere herein. This may include controlling one or more elements to adjust an environmental condition of the food holding chamber **560**, such as temperature, humidity, ventilation, or heat source location. Control commands may also cause an alarm or information to be presented by a display, indicator light, buzzer, speaker, siren, or other notification element disposed within the food holding chamber **560**.

Once the one or more control commands are determined at block **816**, the central controller **510** may communicate the control commands to the one or more food holding chambers **560**. As discussed above, communication may occur via the communication link **530** with the master base **540** and, through the master base **540**, to the one or more food holding chambers **560**. In embodiments in which a central controller **510** is incorporated within the master base **540**, the communication may occur through or from such incorporated central controller **510** to the one or more food holding chambers **560**. The relevant elements of the one or more food holding chambers **560** may then implement the control commands to adjust the operation of the food holding chambers **560** to which the one or more control commands are addressed or directed.

In addition to implementing the control actions at the central controller **510** or the one or more food holding chambers **560**, the method **800** may include presentation of information regarding the one or more control actions to the user at block **820**. As above, presentation of the information may include presentation via the display **512** of a central controller **510** or one or more displays **570** of the food holding chambers **560**. The information presented to the user may include additional information regarding one or more food holding chambers **560**, such as condition, status, environment, contents, or operation. The information may also assist the user in operating the modular food holding system **500**, such as by presenting a countdown, a timer, instructions, recommendations, or other information regarding use or quality of the contents of the one or more food holding chambers **560**. The presentation of information to the user may further server to verify receipt, communication, or implementation of the user selection of a control option.

At block **822**, the method **800** may determine whether operation of the modular food holding system **500** is complete. Determining whether operation is complete may include receiving a signal indicating further operation or discontinuance of operation at the central controller **510**. Such signal may be generated automatically (e.g., upon disconnection of the communicative connection with the master base **540**) or may be received from the user. Determining whether operation is complete may include continuing operation until power is switched off or the power source **550** is removed. When operation is not complete, the method **800** may continue with receiving further data regarding the one or more food holding chambers **560** at block **802**. When operation is determined to be complete, the method **800** may terminate. In some embodiments, a record of the operating session may be saved in the memory **816** or transmitted to a remote memory, such as a server.

Throughout this specification, plural instances may implement components, operations, or structures described as a

single instance. Although individual operations of one or more methods are illustrated and described as separate operations, one or more of the individual operations may be performed concurrently, and nothing requires that the operations be performed in the order illustrated. Structures and functionality presented as separate components in exemplary configurations may be implemented as a combined structure or component. Similarly, structures and functionality presented as a single component may be implemented as separate components. These and other variations, modifications, additions, and improvements fall within the scope of the subject matter herein.

Additionally, certain embodiments are described herein as including logic or a number of routines, subroutines, applications, or instructions. These may constitute either software (code embodied on a non-transitory, tangible machine-readable medium) or hardware. In hardware, the routines, etc., are tangible units capable of performing certain operations and may be configured or arranged in a certain manner. In example embodiments, one or more computer systems (e.g., a standalone, client or server computer system) or one or more hardware modules of a computer system (e.g., a processor or a group of processors) may be configured by software (e.g., an application or application portion) as a hardware module that operates to perform certain operations as described herein.

In various embodiments, a hardware module may be implemented mechanically or electronically. For example, a hardware module may comprise dedicated circuitry or logic that is permanently configured (e.g., as a special-purpose processor, such as a field programmable gate array (FPGA) or an application-specific integrated circuit (ASIC) to perform certain operations. A hardware module may also comprise programmable logic or circuitry (e.g., as encompassed within a general-purpose processor or other programmable processor) that is temporarily configured by software to perform certain operations. It will be appreciated that the decision to implement a hardware module mechanically, in dedicated and permanently configured circuitry, or in temporarily configured circuitry (e.g., configured by software) may be driven by cost and time considerations.

Accordingly, the term “hardware module” should be understood to encompass a tangible entity, be that an entity that is physically constructed, permanently configured (e.g., hardwired), or temporarily configured (e.g., programmed) to operate in a certain manner or to perform certain operations described herein. Considering embodiments in which hardware modules are temporarily configured (e.g., programmed), each of the hardware modules need not be configured or instantiated at any one instance in time. For example, where the hardware modules comprise a general-purpose processor configured using software, the general-purpose processor may be configured as respective different hardware modules at different times. Software may accordingly configure a processor, for example, to constitute a particular hardware module at one instance of time and to constitute a different hardware module at a different instance of time.

Hardware modules can provide information to, and receive information from, other hardware modules. Accordingly, the described hardware modules may be regarded as being directly or indirectly communicatively coupled through a wired or wireless communication link. Where multiple of such hardware modules exist contemporaneously, communications may be achieved through signal transmission (e.g., over appropriate circuits and buses) that connect the hardware modules. In embodiments in which

multiple hardware modules are configured or instantiated at different times, communications between such hardware modules may be achieved, for example, through the storage and retrieval of information in memory structures to which the multiple hardware modules have access. For example, one hardware module may perform an operation and store the output of that operation in a memory device to which it is communicatively coupled. A further hardware module may then, at a later time, access the memory device to retrieve and process the stored output. Hardware modules may also initiate communications with input or output devices, and can operate on a resource (e.g., a collection of information).

The various operations of example methods described herein may be performed, at least partially, by one or more processors that are temporarily configured (e.g., by software) or permanently configured to perform the relevant operations. Whether temporarily or permanently configured, such processors may constitute processor-implemented modules that operate to perform one or more operations or functions. The modules referred to herein may, in some example embodiments, comprise processor-implemented modules.

Similarly, the methods or routines described herein may be at least partially processor-implemented. For example, at least some of the operations of a method may be performed by one or more processors or processor-implemented hardware modules. The performance of certain of the operations may be distributed among the one or more processors, not only residing within a single machine, but deployed across a number of machines. In some example embodiments, the processor or processors may be located in a single location (e.g., within a home environment, an office environment or as a server farm), while in other embodiments the processors may be distributed across a number of locations.

The performance of certain of the operations may be distributed among the one or more processors, not only residing within a single machine, but deployed across a number of machines. In some example embodiments, the one or more processors or processor-implemented modules may be located in a single geographic location (e.g., within a home environment, an office environment, or a server farm). In other example embodiments, the one or more processors or processor-implemented modules may be distributed across a number of geographic locations.

Unless specifically stated otherwise, discussions herein using words such as “processing,” “computing,” “calculating,” “determining,” “presenting,” “displaying,” or the like may refer to actions or processes of a machine (e.g., a computer) that manipulates or transforms data represented as physical (e.g., electronic, magnetic, or optical) quantities within one or more memories (e.g., volatile memory, non-volatile memory, or a combination thereof), registers, or other machine components that receive, store, transmit, or display information.

As used herein any reference to “one embodiment” or “an embodiment” means that a particular element, feature, structure, or characteristic described in connection with the embodiment is included in at least one embodiment. The appearances of the phrase “in one embodiment” in various places in the specification are not necessarily all referring to the same embodiment.

Some embodiments may be described using the expression “coupled” and “connected” along with their derivatives. For example, some embodiments may be described using the term “coupled” to indicate that two or more elements are in direct physical or electrical contact. The term “coupled,”

however, may also mean that two or more elements are not in direct contact with each other, but yet still co-operate or interact with each other. The embodiments are not limited in this context.

As used herein, the terms “comprises,” “comprising,” “includes,” “including,” “has,” “having” or any other variation thereof, are intended to cover a non-exclusive inclusion. For example, a process, method, article, or apparatus that comprises a list of elements is not necessarily limited to only those elements but may include other elements not expressly listed or inherent to such process, method, article, or apparatus. Further, unless expressly stated to the contrary, “or” refers to an inclusive or and not to an exclusive or. For example, a condition A or B is satisfied by any one of the following: A is true (or present) and B is false (or not present), A is false (or not present) and B is true (or present), and both A and B are true (or present).

In addition, use of the “a” or “an” are employed to describe elements and components of the embodiments herein. This is done merely for convenience and to give a general sense of the description. This description, and the claims that follow, should be read to include one or at least one and the singular also includes the plural unless it is obvious that it is meant otherwise.

This detailed description is to be construed as exemplary only and does not describe every possible embodiment, as describing every possible embodiment would be impractical, if not impossible. One could implement numerous alternate embodiments, using either current technology or technology developed after the filing date of this application.

The foregoing description is for purposes of illustration only and not for purposes of limitation. The true scope of the invention is set forth by the appurtenant claims.

What is claimed:

1. A modular food holding system comprising:

- a master base configured to communicatively connect each of one or more food holding chambers to a central controller;
- a first food holding chamber having a first chamber housing, a first male upstream power and communications port that extends away from a bottom surface of the first chamber housing, a first female downstream power and communications port located into a top surface of the first chamber housing, and a plurality of first alignment structures that each comprise a post separate and spaced apart from the first male upstream power and communications port and that extend away from the bottom surface of the first chamber housing, in an engagement direction between the first male upstream power and communication port and first female downstream power and communication port, a greater distance than the first male upstream power and communications port extends away from the bottom surface of the first chamber housing; and
- a second food holding chamber connecting the master base to the first food holding chamber, the second food holding chamber having a second chamber housing and second alignment structures, the second alignment structures each comprise a hole into a top surface of the second chamber housing, the second alignment structures having a complementary shape to the first alignment structures and cooperating with the first alignment structures to align the first food holding chamber with the second food holding chamber when the first and second food holding chambers are stacked to form a food holding unit;

27

wherein the second food holding chamber has a second male upstream power and communications port that extends away from a bottom surface of the second chamber housing and a second female downstream power and communications port located into a top surface of the second chamber housing such that the engagement direction of the first male upstream power and communications port and the second female downstream power and communications port is parallel to an insertion direction of the first alignment structure into the second alignment structure, and

wherein the first alignment structures and the second alignment structures center and stabilize the first food holding chamber on the second food holding chamber.

2. The modular food holding system of claim 1, wherein the first food holding chamber includes first securing mechanisms on the bottom surface of the first chamber housing, wherein the first alignment structures extend away from the bottom surface of the first chamber housing a greater distance than the first securing mechanisms; and

wherein the second food holding chamber includes second securing mechanisms complementary to the first securing mechanisms and formed in the top surface of the second chamber housing.

3. The modular food holding system of claim 2, wherein the first alignment structures are arranged at the corners of the bottom surface of the first chamber housing.

4. The modular food holding system of claim 3, wherein the first securing mechanisms are arranged at the sides of the bottom surface of the first chamber housing and the first securing mechanisms extend in an elongated direction parallel to an adjacent side of the bottom surface, wherein at least one of the first securing mechanisms is perpendicular to another of the first securing mechanisms.

5. The modular food holding system of claim 2, wherein the first securing mechanisms are brackets and the second securing mechanisms are openings.

6. The modular food holding system of claim 1, wherein the master base is directly connected to the second food holding chamber.

7. The modular food holding system of claim 6, wherein the second food holding chamber includes a chamber alignment structure on the bottom surface of the second chamber housing, and the master base includes a base alignment structure on a top surface of a base housing, the base alignment structure cooperating with the chamber alignment structure to align the second food holding chamber with the master base when the second food holding chamber is stacked atop the master base to form a food holding unit.

8. The modular food holding system of claim 7, wherein the chamber alignment structure is a post that extends outward from the bottom surface of the second chamber housing.

9. The modular food holding system of claim 8, wherein the base alignment structure is a hole that is sized and shaped to receive the post.

10. The modular food holding system of claim 6, wherein the second food holding chamber includes a chamber securing mechanism on the bottom surface of the second chamber housing, and the master base includes a base securing structure on a top surface of the base housing.

11. The modular food holding system of claim 10, wherein the chamber securing mechanism is a bracket and the base securing mechanism is an opening that is sized and shaped to receive the bracket.

28

12. The modular food holding system of claim 6, further comprising an expansion base operatively connected to the master base.

13. The modular food holding system of claim 12, wherein the expansion base is operatively connected to the master base with an upstream power and communications port disposed in a side surface of an expansion base housing.

14. The modular food holding system of claim 12, wherein the expansion base includes an expansion alignment structure on a top surface of an expansion base housing, the expansion base alignment structure cooperating with a chamber alignment structure formed in a bottom surface of a third food holding chamber to align the third food holding chamber with the expansion base when the third food holding chamber is stacked atop the expansion base to form a food holding unit.

15. A modular food holding system comprising:

a master base configured to communicatively connect each of one or more food holding chambers to a central controller;

a first food holding chamber having a first chamber housing, a first female upstream power and communications port located into a bottom surface of the first chamber housing, a first male downstream power and communications port located on a top surface of the first chamber housing, and a plurality of first alignment structures, each first alignment structure of the plurality comprising a hole on the bottom surface of the first chamber housing; and

a second food holding chamber connecting the master base to the first food holding chamber, the second food holding chamber having a second chamber housing and a plurality of second alignment structures, each second alignment structure of the plurality comprising a post that extends away from a top surface of the second chamber housing, the second alignment structures having complementary shapes to the first alignment structures and cooperating with the first alignment structures to align the first food holding chamber with the second food holding chamber when the first and second food holding chambers are stacked to form a food holding unit;

wherein the second food holding chamber has a second female upstream power and communications port located into a bottom surface of the second chamber housing and a second male downstream power and communications port extending from a top surface of the second chamber housing, wherein the second alignment structures are separate and spaced apart from the second male downstream power and communications port, and the second alignment structures extend away from the top surface of the second chamber housing, in an engagement direction of the first female upstream power and communications port and the second male downstream power and communications port, a greater distance than the second male downstream power and communications port extends away from the top surface of the second chamber housing, and the engagement direction of the first upstream power and communications port and the second downstream power and communications port is parallel to an insertion direction of the second alignment structure into the first alignment structure, and

wherein the first alignment structures and the second alignment structures center and stabilize the first food holding chamber on the second food holding chamber.

16. The modular food holding system of claim **15**, wherein the first food holding chamber includes first securing mechanisms formed in the bottom surface of the first chamber housing; and

wherein the second food holding chamber includes second securing mechanisms complementary to the first securing mechanisms and extending from the top surface of the second chamber housing, wherein the second alignment structures extend away from the top surface of the second chamber housing a greater distance than the second securing mechanisms.

17. The modular food holding system of claim **16**, wherein the first alignment structures are arranged at the corners of the bottom surface of the first chamber housing and the second alignment structures are arranged at the corners of the top surface of the second chamber housing.

18. The modular food holding system of claim **17**, wherein the second securing mechanisms are arranged at the sides of the top surface of the second chamber housing and the second securing mechanisms extend in an elongated direction parallel to an adjacent side of the top surface.

19. The modular food holding system of claim **16**, wherein the first securing mechanisms are openings and the second securing mechanisms are brackets.

20. The modular food holding system of claim **15**, wherein the master base is directly connected to the second food holding chamber.

* * * * *