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Carriger, Jr.

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[54] **PORTABLE CATERING SYSTEM**

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Related U.S. Application Data

[63] Continuation-in-part of Ser. No. 508,437, Jul. 28, 1995, abandoned.

[51] **Int. Cl.**[6] **A45C 11/20**

[52] **U.S. Cl.** **206/542**; 206/546; 206/549

[58] **Field of Search** 206/499, 541, 206/543–548, 549, 542, 546

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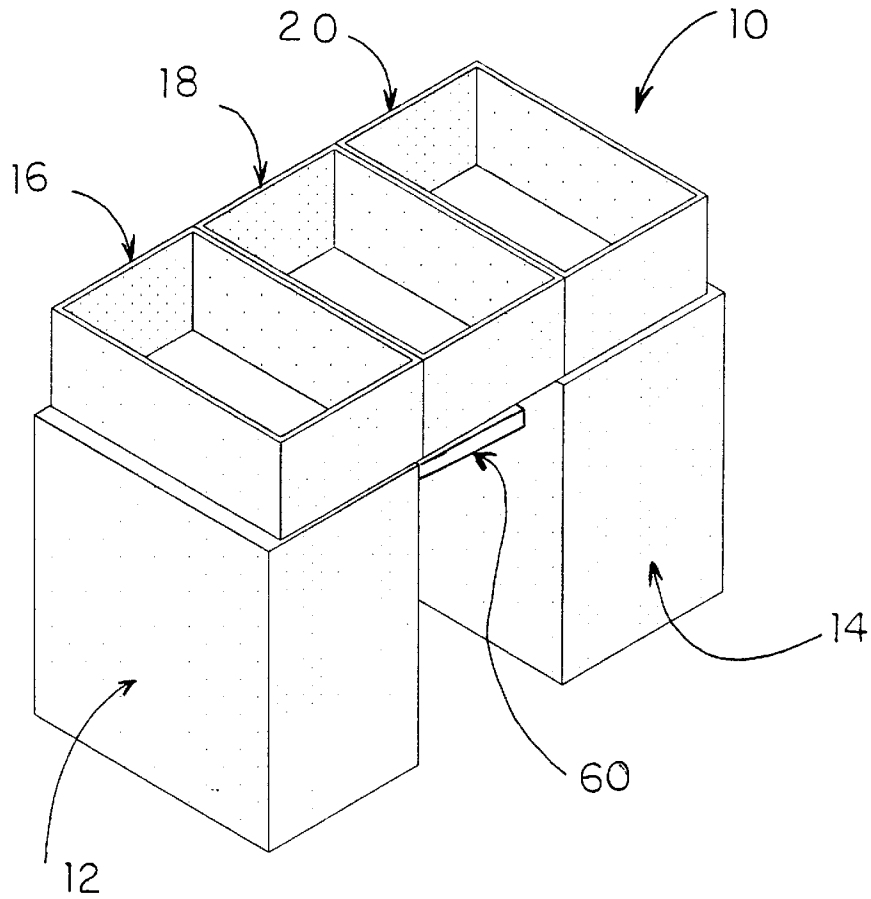
[57] **ABSTRACT**

Disclosed is a portable catering system for transporting, storing and serving food. In one embodiment, the portable catering system comprises first and second carrying cases, a first, second and third trays each having at least one cavity to store food, and an interconnect member. The portable catering system is operable from a transportation position to a dispensing position. In the transportation position, the trays are stacked upon each other and the first and second carrying cases are disposed about the stacked trays whereby the portable catering system may be carried or transported. In the dispensing position, the first and second carrying cases disassembled and spaced adjacent to each other and connected by the interconnect member whereby the first tray is supported on top of the first carrying case, the second tray is supported on top of the interconnect member and the third tray is supported on top of the second carrying case thereby allowing the food to be dispensed.

8 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



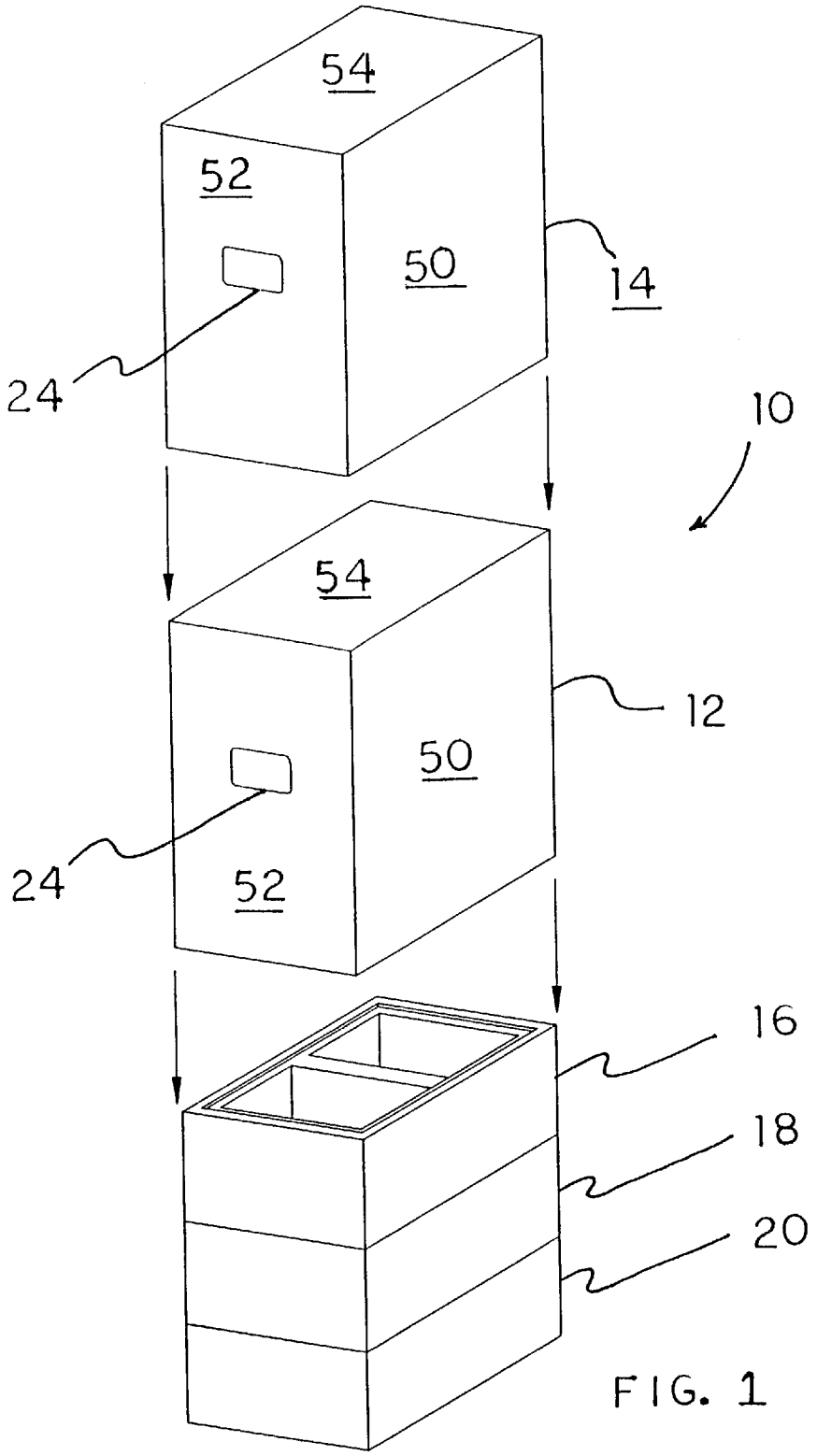
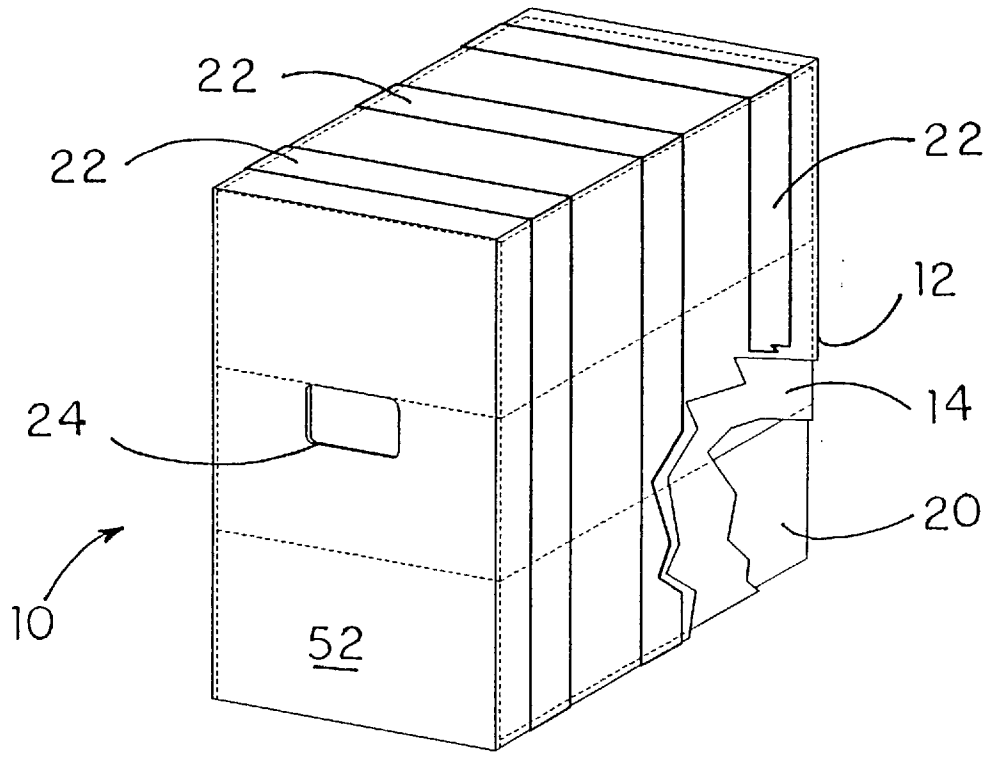


FIG. 1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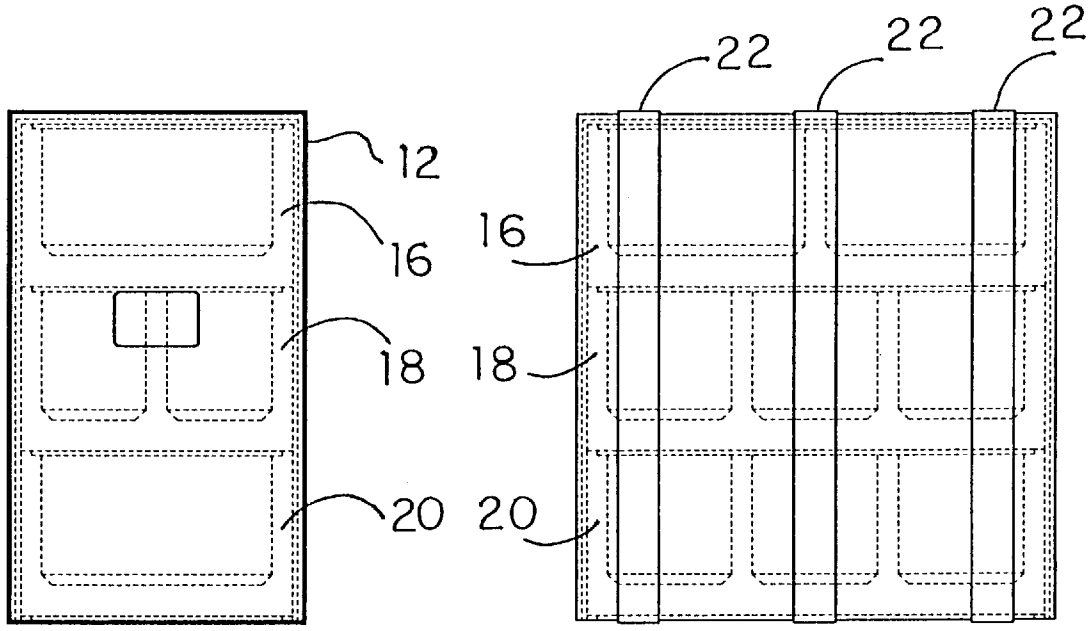
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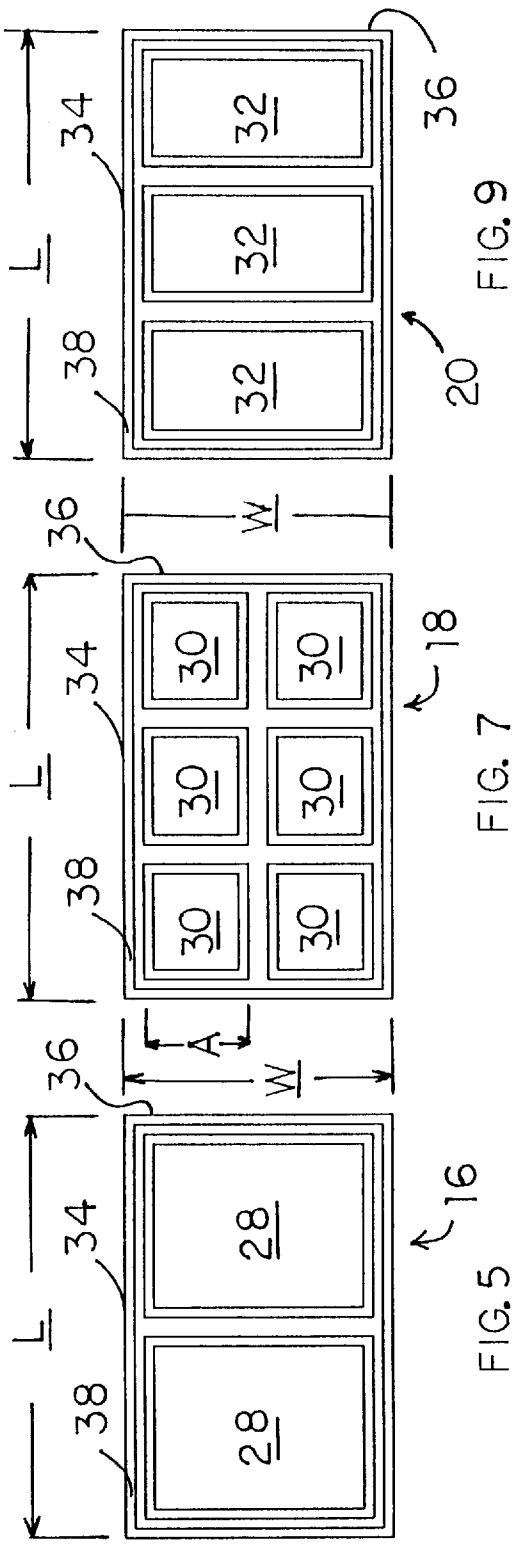

FIG. 5

FIG. 7

FIG. 9

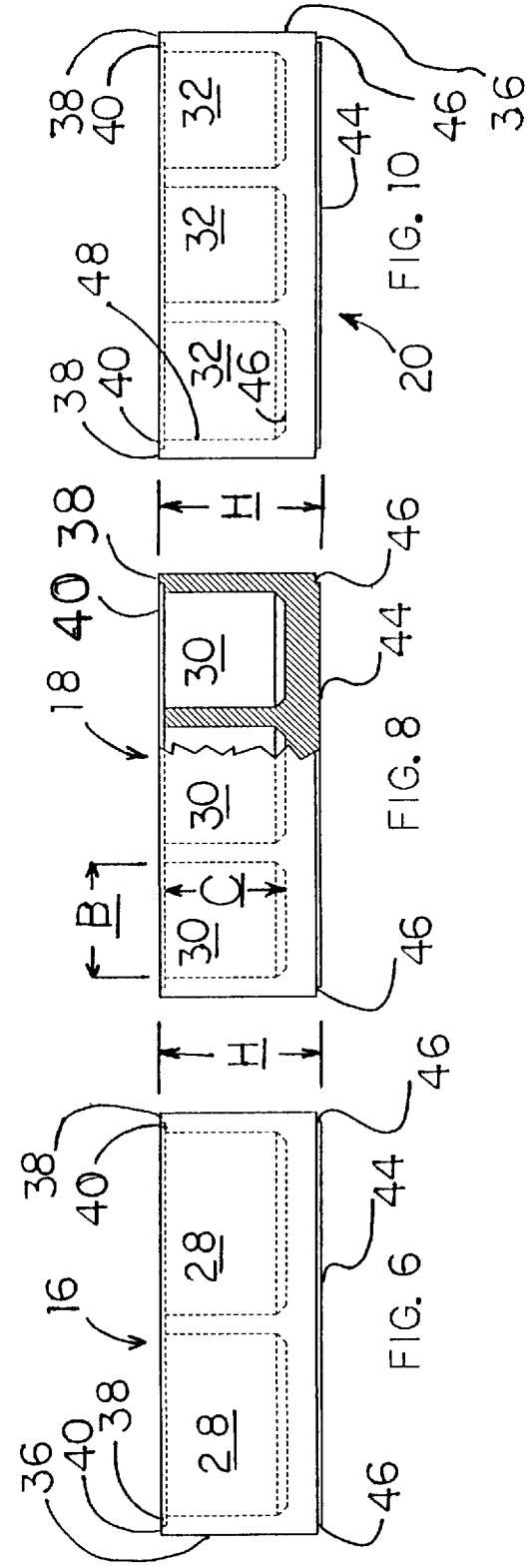

FIG. 6

FIG. 8

FIG. 10

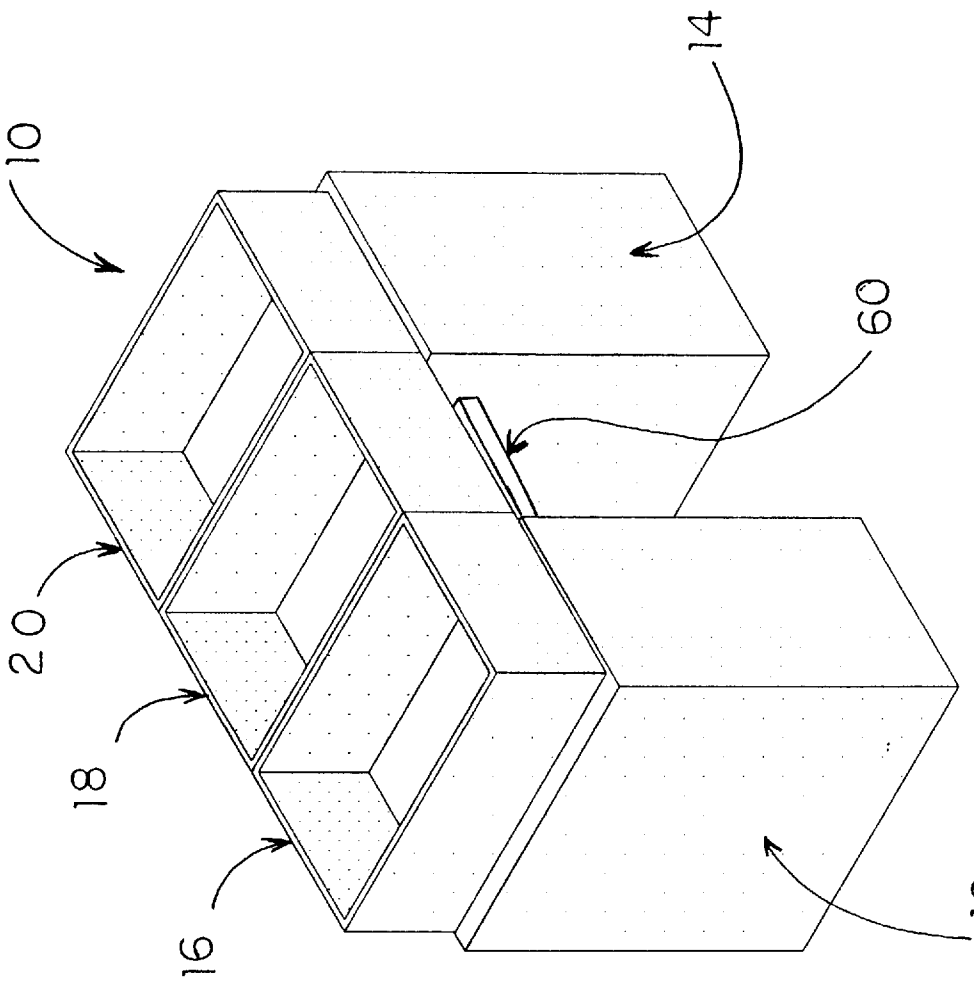

FIG. 11

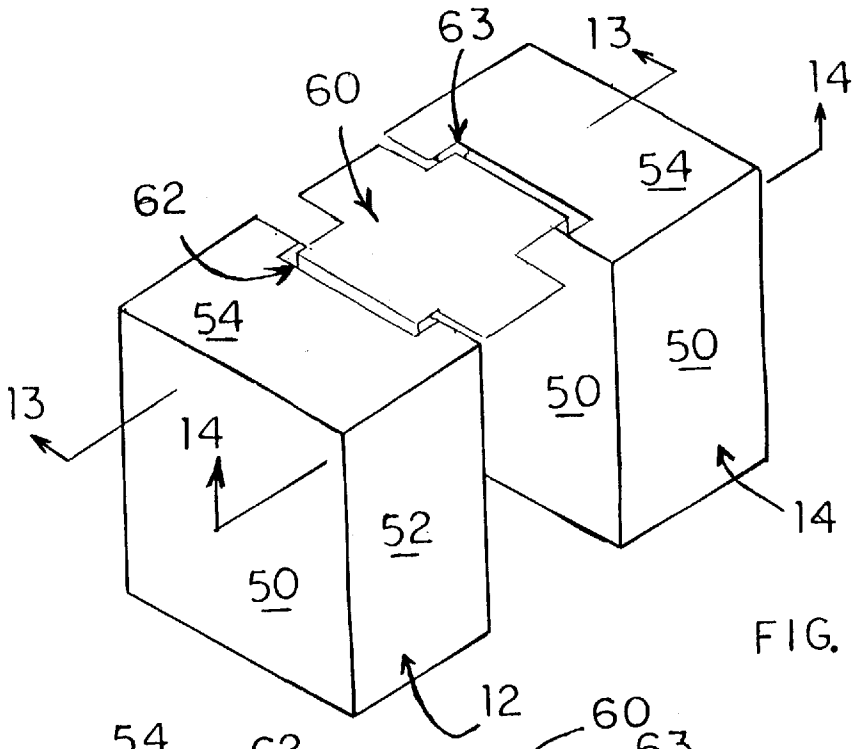

FIG. 12

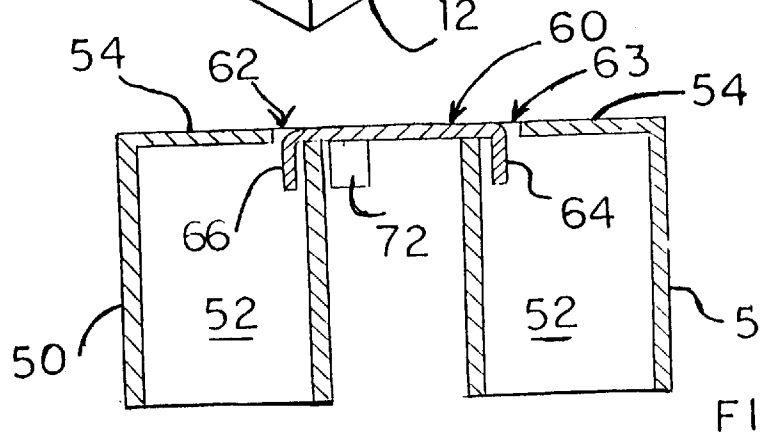

FIG. 13

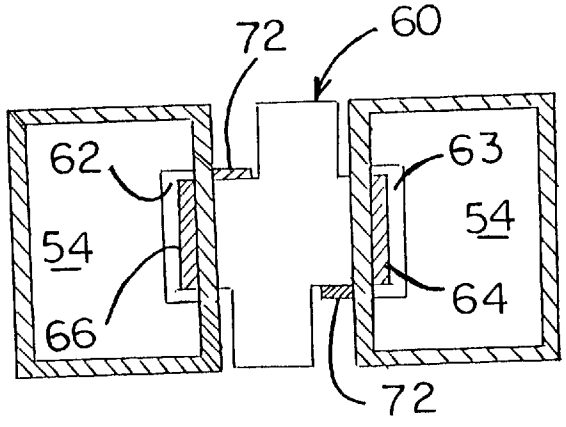

FIG. 14

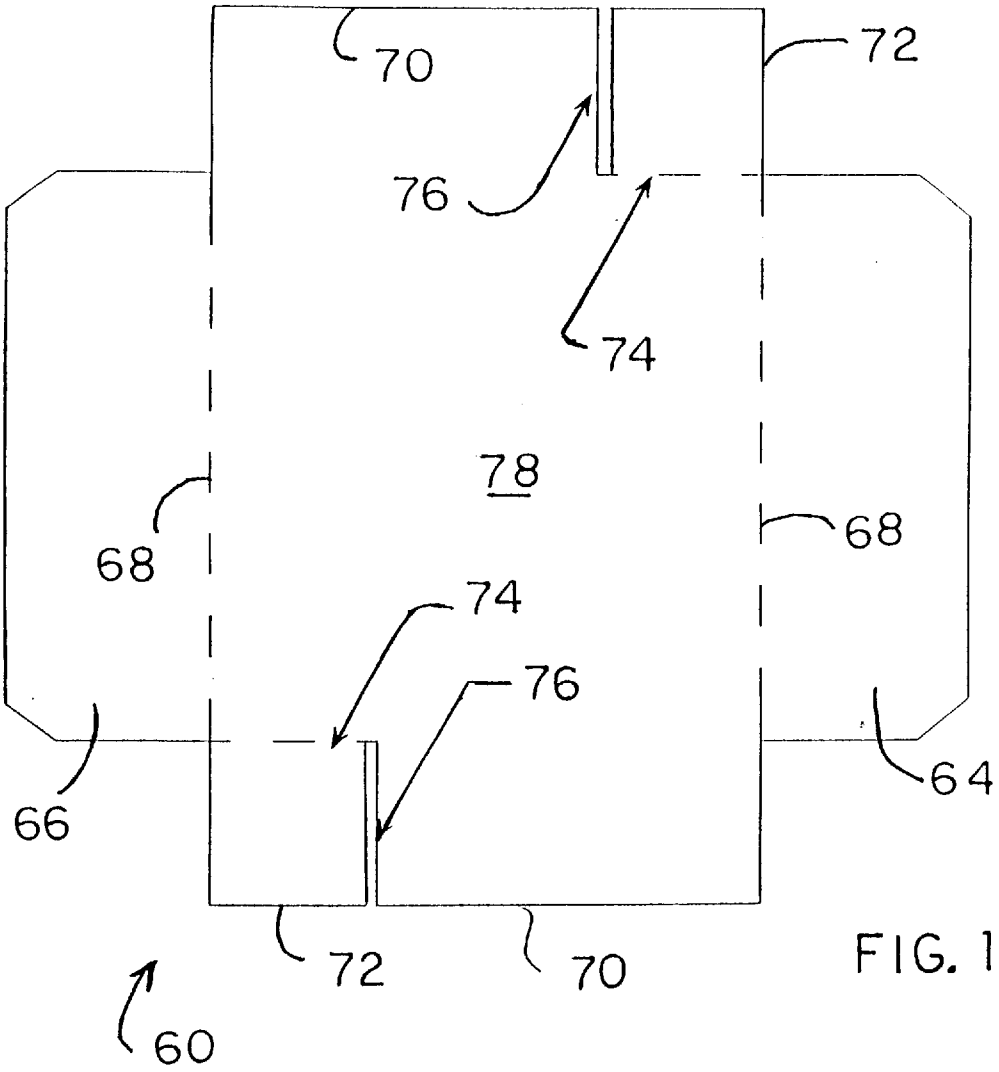

FIG. 15

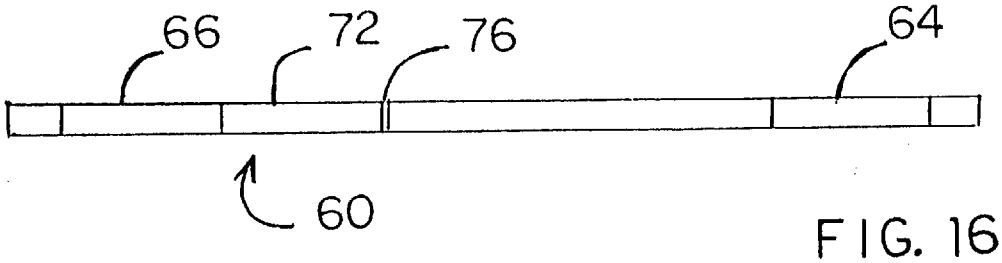

FIG. 16

PORTABLE CATERING SYSTEM

This application claims priority to and is a continuation-in-part of application Ser. No. 08/508,437 filed on Jul. 28, 1995 now abandoned.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to food transportation, storage and serving systems. More specifically, the present invention relates to portable food transportation, storage and serving systems.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

People who attend events such as football games or concerts often desire to consume food prior to and/or during the event. Typically, such people either purchase prepared food at a local store or purchase unprepared food and prepare the same at the event. To transport and/or store the food, people often use conventional devices such as Styrofoam coolers. When service for several or more people is desired, several coolers are required. Although infrequently, some people may bring with them conventional devices such as folding tables to serve the food.

Food transportation, storing and serving systems of the above type have several disadvantages. First, several coolers are often necessary to transport and store the food. Use and transportation of multiple coolers is often inconvenient and undesirable. Second, coolers become dirty and unsanitary and must be replaced often. Third, few people are willing to go through the trouble of bringing a folding table to an event. The primary reason for this is that the folding table is difficult to transport and will become dirty and require cleaning after use. In such circumstances, people are forced to place the coolers on the ground or on some other object such as a car to serve the food.

SUMMARY OF THE PRESENT INVENTION

A primary object of the present invention is to provide a portable catering system whereby food, beverage or related products can be easily transported, stored and served.

Another object of the present invention is to provide a portable catering system that can be sold by a vendor to a purchaser with the desired food, beverage and related products already contained therein and which can then be easily transported, stored and served by the purchaser at the event site.

The above objects are realized by the present invention which is a portable catering system for transporting, storing dispensing food products and related items. In one embodiment, the portable catering buffet system comprises a carrying case and a series of stacked trays each having at least one cavity to store food. During transportation, the trays are stacked together and secured by the carrying case. To serve the food, the trays are unstacked and the carrying case is used as a table top to support the trays.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The following detailed description of the present invention will become more fully understood with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

FIG. **1** is an exploded perspective view of the present invention;

FIG. **2** is a perspective view of the present invention;

FIGS. **3** and **4** are end and side views of present invention shown in FIG. **1**, respectively, with the internal food trays shown in phantom;

FIG. **5** is a top plan view of a two cavity tray of the present invention;

FIG. **6** is a cross-section view taken along line **6—6** of FIG. **5**;

FIG. **7** is a top plan view of a six cavity tray of the present invention;

FIG. **8** is a cross-section view taken along either of lines **8—8** of FIG. **7**;

FIG. **9** is a top plan view of a three cavity tray of the present invention;

FIG. **10** is a cross-section view taken along line **10—10** of FIG. **9**;

FIG. **11** is a perspective view of a second embodiment of the present invention shown in the dispensing position with the trays mounted thereon;

FIG. **12** is a perspective view of the second embodiment shown in the dispensing position without the trays mounted thereon; and

FIG. **13** is a cross-section view taken along line **13—13** of FIG. **12**.

FIG. **14** is a cross-section view taken along line **14—14** of FIG. **12**.

FIG. **15** is a plan view of the inter-connect portion; and

FIG. **16** is a front elevation view of the inter-connect portion.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Referring to FIGS. **1–4**, where the portable catering system **10** of the present invention is shown in an assembled position. The portable catering system **10** generally comprises first and second carrying cases **12** and **14** and a series of stackable food trays **16**, **18**, and **20**. The first carrying case **12** is mountable about the stacked trays **16**, **18**, and **20** while the second carrying case **14** is mountable about the first carrying case **12**. The portable catering system **10** further comprises a plurality of plastic straps **22** to secure the assembly of the carrying cases **12** and **14** and stacked trays **16**, **18**, and **20**.

The first carrying case **12** comprises a rectangular box-like configuration open at the bottom and having side walls **50**, end walls **52**, and a top wall **54**. Each of the end walls **52** includes a rectangular hand-slot or cut-out **24** which acts as a handle to transport the portable catering system **10**.

The second carrying case **14** is constructed in the same manner as first carrying case **12** except that the inner dimensions of the second carrying case **14** are larger than that of the first carrying case **12** to allow the second carrying case **14** to be easily placed upon and removed from the first carrying case **12**. The second carrying case **14** is utilized to provide additional support during transportation as well as an additional table top to support the trays during serving.

When assembled, the stacked trays **16**, **18** and **20** fit within the first carrying case **12** with the top wall **54** in superposed relation to the uppermost stacked tray which in the embodiment shown is tray **16**. The subassembly of the stacked trays **16**, **18** and **20** and the first carrying case **12** fit within the second carrying case **14** with the top wall **54** in superposed relation to the top wall **54** of the first carrying case **12**. The first and second carrying cases **12** and **14** are preferably positioned such that the hand-slots **24** are aligned. The first and second carrying cases **12** and **14** are preferably made from heavy gauge cardboard material for durability during transportation and for use as a table top during serving of the food products.

As shown by FIGS. **5–10**, tray **16** comprises two cavities **28**, tray **18** comprises six cavities **30**, and tray **20** comprises three cavities **32**. In the preferred embodiment, the trays **16**, **18**, and **20** are formed from Styrofoam and are of generally rectangular shape. In the preferred embodiment, the length **1** of the trays **16**, **18** and **20** is 22.0 inches, while the width w of the trays is 13.75 inches and the height h of the trays is 8.25 inches.

Each of the trays **16**, **18** and **20** comprise long walls **34** and short walls **36**. The long walls **34** and the short walls **36** have a thickness of about one (1.0) inch and comprise a top surface **38** and a first shoulder **40** having a width of about one-half (0.5) inch and which is continuously formed adjacent to the top surface **38**. Each of the trays **16**, **18**, and **20** further comprise a base **44** and a second shoulder **46** having a width of about one-half (0.5) inch and which extends continuously around the periphery of the base **44**. The first shoulder **40** and the second shoulder **46** are provided such that trays **16**, **18** and **20** may be stacked on top of each other during transportation, by for example, engaging the second shoulder **46** of the tray **16** with the first shoulder **40** of the tray **18**, and engaging the second shoulder **46** of the tray **18** with the first shoulder **40** of the tray **20**.

The trays **16**, **18** and **20** may be formed with more or less than six cavities but the external dimensions of the trays should preferably remain the same. The greater the number of cavities or bins, the smaller are the dimensions of the individual cavities. For example, in the six cavity tray **18**, each cavity **30** has a width a of 5.375 inches, a length b of 6.000 inches, and a height c of 6.500 inches. Each of the cavities **28**, **30**, and **32** comprise a bottom surface **46** and inner walls **48**. The inner walls **48** are angled at 45 degrees at its jointure with the bottom surface **46** for ease of manufacture.

In operation, food, eating utensils, napkins, table cloth etc. are initially stored inside cavities **28**, **30**, and **32** of the trays **16**, **18** and **20**, respectively. Thereafter, the trays **16**, **18** and **20** are stacked as heretofore described. When the portable catering system **10**, which has been transported to the site of the buffet by truck or van for example, arrives at the site, the straps **22** are cut and the first carrying case **12** and the second carrying case **14** are lifted from the stacked trays **14**, **16**, and **18**. Thereafter, the first and second carrying cases **12** and **14** are positioned next to each other with their top walls **54** facing upward to form a table and the trays **16**, **18**, and **20** are unstacked and placed upon the top walls **54** for serving. After use, the trays **16**, **18** and **20** and the carrying cases **12** and **14** may be discarded.

FIGS. **11–16**, show a second embodiment of the present invention wherein the portable catering system **12** further comprises an interconnect member **60** which is adapted to engage with first carrying case **12** and second carrying case **14** to thereby provide additional area in which to support trays **16**, **18**, and **20** and to provide a rigid and secure assembled unit during dispensing. In the embodiment shown, the first tray **16** is disposed upon the first carrying case **12**, the second tray **18** is disposed upon the interconnect member **60**, and the third tray **20** is disposed upon the second carrying case **14**. The interconnect member **60** generally comprises a top portion **78** and first and second side panels **64** and **66** which are foldable about cut or scored lines **68**. The carrying cases **12** and **14** are provided with a slot or elongated opening **62** and **63**, respectively, along one of its sides **50**. First and second side panels **64** and **66** are adapted to insert into slots **62** and **63**, respectively. The interconnect member **60** further comprises end portions **70** each having an end panel **72** which is foldable about a cut or score line **74** and a slot portion **76**. The end panels **72** are adapted to provide additional rigidity to the portable catering device **10** when it is assembled into the dispensing position.

The portable catering system **10** is operable from a transportation position (FIGS. **1–4**) to a dispensing position (FIGS. **11** and **12**). In the transportation position, the second tray **18** is stackable upon said third tray **20** and the first tray **16** is stackable upon the second tray **18**. The first carrying case **12** is disposed about or slid over stacked trays **16**, **18**, and **20** and the second carrying case **14** is disposed about or slid over the first carrying case **12**, and the side portion **64** of the interconnect member **60** is engaged with or inserted into the slot **63** of the second carrying case **14**. Straps **22** are placed around the assembly whereby the portable catering system **10** may be transported. In the dispensing or assembled position, the straps **22** are discarded and the first and second carrying cases **12** and **14** are disassembled and spaced adjacent to each other with the slots **62** and **63** facing each other. The first and second side portions **64** and **66** of the interconnect member **60** are engaged with or inserted into the slots **62** and **63** of the first and second carrying cases **12** and **14**, respectively. Thereafter, the first tray **16** is positioned and supported on top of the first case **12**, the second tray **18** is positioned and supported on top of the interconnect member **60** and the third tray **20** is positioned and supported on top of the second carrying case **20**, whereby the food within the trays **16**, **18**, and **20** can be dispensed.

Although two carrying cases **12** and **14** have been shown, the system **10** may be configured with three or more carrying cases whereupon in the dispensing position, suhc three or more carrying cases are placed adjacent to one another thereby providing surface area on which to support all of the trays above the ground In this embodiment, the interconnect member would not be necessary. The foregoing description is intended primarily for purposes of illustration. This invention may be embodied in other forms or carried out in other ways without departing from the spirit or scope of the invention. Modifications and variations still falling within the spirit or the scope of the invention will be readily apparent to those of skill in the art.

What is claimed is:

1. A portable catering system for transporting, storing, and serving food comprising:

a first carrying case comprising first and second side walls, a top portion, an open bottom portion, and a mounting opening;

a second carrying case comprising first and second side walls, a top portion, an open bottom portion, and a mounting opening;

a first tray having at least one cavity to store food;

a second tray having at least one cavity to store food;

a third tray having at least one cavity to store food;

an interconnect member having a top portion and respective first and second side portions;

said portable catering system being operable from a transportation position to a dispensing position;

said transportation position being said second tray stacked upon said third tray, said first tray stacked upon said second tray, said first and second carrying cases being disposed about said stacked trays; and

said dispensing position being said first and second carrying cases are spaced apart and disposed adjacent to each other and said first and second side portions of said interconnect member are engaged with said

mounting openings of said first and second carrying cases, respectively, and said first tray is supported on said top portion of said first carrying case, said second tray is supported on said top portion of said interconnect member and said third tray is supported on said top portion of said second carrying case.

2. The system of claim **1**, wherein said first and second side portions of said interconnect member are each foldable about score lines.

3. The system of claim **1**, wherein said mounting openings of said first and second cases are each in the form of a slot.

4. The system of claim **1** further comprising at least one strap disposed around said first and second carrying cases in said transportation position.

5. The system of claim **1**, wherein said first side portion of said interconnect member is engaged with said mounting opening of said second carrying case in said transportation position.

6. The system of claim **1**, wherein said first and second carrying cases and said first, second, and third trays are each of rectangular shape.

7. The system of claim **1**, wherein said first, second and third trays each comprise a plurality of cavities.

8. The system of claim **1**, wherein said top portion of each of said first and second carrying cases is substantially solid.

* * * * *