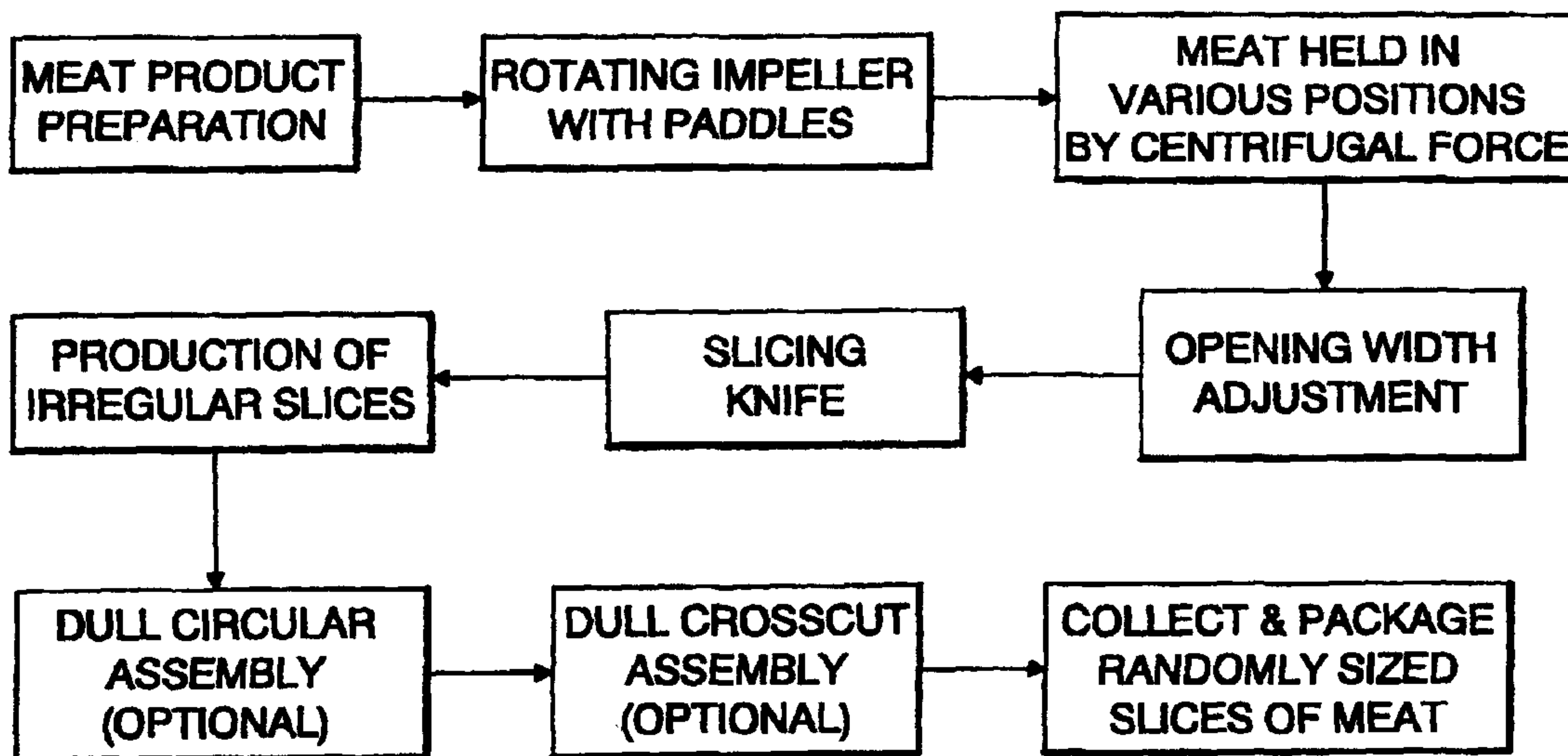




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 (54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS TO MECHANICALLY REDUCE FOOD PRODUCTS INTO IRREGULAR SHAPES AND SIZES



(57) Abrégé/Abstract:

Methods and apparatus are disclosed for producing irregular slices of meat from meat products. The meat products can be rotated using an impeller having a plurality of paddles for urging the meat products against a slicing blade during rotation of the impeller in order to create a slice from the meat product. The meat products can impact the slicing blade in different orientations in order to create differently shaped, irregular slices of meat. A cutting blade downstream of the slicing blade can be used to reduce the width of the slices of meat.

Abstract

Methods and apparatus are disclosed for producing irregular slices of meat from meat products. The meat products can be rotated using an impeller having a plurality of paddles for urging the meat products against a slicing blade during rotation of the impeller in order to create a slice from the meat product. The meat products can impact the slicing blade in different orientations in order to create differently shaped, irregular slices of meat. A cutting blade downstream of the slicing blade can be used to reduce the width of the slices of meat.

METHOD AND APPARATUS TO MECHANICALLY REDUCE FOOD PRODUCTS INTO IRREGULAR SHAPES AND SIZES

FIELD

[0001] This disclosure relates generally to a method and apparatus for producing food slices of irregular shape and size.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Cutting and slicing systems for various food products like vegetables, fruits, and meat products are known. When focused on meat products, the systems in the art are typically directed to producing uniform slices and cuts. In fact, the art exhibits a systematic progression to achieve greater and greater uniformity. This is true whether the system is producing a diced product, where the squareness of the final product is the desired trait, or producing a sliced product, where uniformity of thickness, size, and shape is preferred. These systems produce a final meat product that is packaged and presented to the consumer with each piece looking generally the same as the next.

[0003] An important factor in a consumer's selection is the visual appearance of the cut food product. If put off by the uniformity normally on display by mass produced meat products, consumers may instead desire "home-style" products with an appearance similar to meat cut from a home cooked turkey or ham. Meat products that are irregular in shape and size can solve this need without requiring the consumer to spend hours preparing a home cooked meat product. However, the known cutting and slicing systems for producing slices of meat with irregular shapes and sizes do not provide a sufficient solution this problem.

[0004] When applied on a mass scale, manual cutting and slicing is simply not cost effective, requiring tedious processing and excessive manual labor. Accordingly, there have been other attempts at producing irregular shaped and sized slices. One method known in the art involves using molds to shape the meat in casing to give them an irregular shape. These molded slices of meat are then put through a traditional cutting or slicing system, which produces a product with an irregular appearing shape,

but also with uniform thickness and size. Another method uses a technique of skimming the bottom of a cooked meat product to produce slices with a roughed up appearance. A final method to produce slices with an irregular shape and size involves simply taking slices from several different sticks of meat and packaging them together. However, all of these techniques still result in slices of meat that have an overall uniform appearance and/or a lack of a cost-effective technique.

[0005] Therefore, a method and apparatus is needed to mass produce high quality slices of meat of irregular shape and size in a cost effective manner. The disclosed method and apparatus produces high quality, unique slices of meat that have irregular edges, natural meat grains, and natural color variation.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0006] FIGURE 1 is a flow diagram of a method for producing meat slices of irregular shape and size;

[0007] FIGURE 2 is a side elevation view of an apparatus for producing meat slices of irregular shape and size;

[0008] FIGURE 3 is a front elevation view of an apparatus shown in FIG. 2.

[0009] FIGURE 4 is a perspective view of the apparatus of FIG. 2 with the optional front panel open.

[0010] FIGURE 5 is a side elevation view of the impeller and knife assembly of the apparatus of FIG. 2; and

[0011] FIGURE 6 is a perspective view of an optional circular knife assembly for use in the apparatus of FIG. 2.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0012] With reference to the drawings, a method and processing machine is provided for use in producing irregularly shaped and sized food products and, in particular, for use in producing irregularly shaped and sized meat slices. The processing machine is generally referred to by reference numeral **10** in FIGS. 2-4.

[0013] With reference to Figs. 2-5, the rotary processing machine **10** comprises a support frame **12** and a housing **14**. Prepared meat products **46** are fed into a rotary

impeller **34**, which is rotatably attached in the housing **14**. The impeller **34** comprises a plurality of equally spaced paddles **40** and is encircled by a stationary cylinder **48**. A motor **42** drives the rotation of the impeller **34**. As the impeller **34** rotates, the paddles **40** catch the meat product **46** and carry it along an inner surface **50** of the stationary cylinder **48**. The stationary cylinder **48** includes an opening **54**. On one side of the opening **54**, a slicing knife **56** is attached. As the impeller **34** drives the meat product **46** around the inner surface **50** of the stationary cylinder **48**, the meat product **46** approaches the opening **54** and impacts the slicing knife **56**. The meat products **46** are able to tumble in the impeller so that different sides are engaged by the slicing knife **56**. This process produces meat slices **46a** of irregular shape and size.

[0014] The rotary processing machine **10** can further include a circular knife assembly **60**. The circular knife assembly **60** is positioned proximal to the opening **54**, but downstream of the slicing knife **56**. The circular knife assembly **60** is oriented generally parallel with the slicing knife **56**. The circular knife assembly **60** may then further reduce the size of the meat product **46**, while still producing meat slices **46a** of irregular shape and size. The circular knife assembly **60** would have at least one circular, rotating cutting blade **68**. The blade **68** preferably is dulled to produce rough cutting edges.

[0015] The rotary processing machine **10** can further include a cross cut knife assembly **76**. The cross cut knife assembly **76** is positioned proximal to and downstream of the circular knife assembly **60** and the slicing knife **56**. The cross cut knife assembly **76** is oriented generally parallel with the slicing knife **56**. The cross cut knife assembly **76** may then further reduce the size of the meat product **46**, while still producing meat slices **46a** of irregular shape and size. The cross cut knife assembly **76** would have at least one cross cut blade **78**. The blade **78** preferably is dulled to produce rough cutting edges.

[0016] The rotary processing machine **10** can be made to be highly space efficient. For example, in one embodiment, the rotary processing machine **10** may have a height in the range of 50 inches to 72 inches, and preferably in the range of 54 inches to 69 inches. In addition, the rotary processing machine **10** may weigh in the range of 1,400 pounds to 1,600 pounds, and preferably about 1,500 pounds.

[0017] The frame **12** provides the support for the rotary processing machine **10**. In one embodiment, the frame **12** may have a length in the range of 26 inches to 38 inches and a width in the range of 25 inches to 37 inches. In the preferred embodiment, the frame **12** has a length of about 32 inches and a width of about 31 inches. These embodiments are designed to utilize a relatively small area while still allowing the rotary processing machine **10** to operate in a high-speed commercial environment.

[0018] The small area allows the rotary processing machine **10** to seamlessly integrate with existing operations. The frame **12** may further comprise numerous legs **16**. In the preferred embodiment, each of the legs **16** has casters **18** at their terminal end to allow for greater mobility of the rotary processing machine **10**. At least one caster **18** preferably has a locking mechanism **20** that an operator can engage to prevent the rotary processing machine **10** from moving when movement is not desired.

[0019] The frame **12** is attached to and supports the housing **14**. In one embodiment, the housing **14** may have a length in the range of 37 inches to 67 inches, and preferably in the range of 47 inches to 62 inches, and more preferably about 57 inches. The housing **14** may enclose any or all of the motor **42**, the impeller **34**, the stationary cylinder **48**, the knife assembly **52**, and an electrical component box **32**. The housing **14** may also include access to the devices enclosed within it. In one embodiment, this access comprises a front panel **22**. The front panel **22** may be hinged to provide the operator access to the impeller **34**, the stationary cylinder **48** and the knife assembly **36**. This feature provides the user with easy access to these devices as needed, for example, for maintenance or cleaning. In another embodiment, this access may include a back panel **24**. The back panel **24** may be hinged to provide the operator access to at least the electrical component box **32**, as needed.

[0020] The housing **14** includes a hopper **26**. The hopper **26** is positioned to receive the prepared meat product **46** and feed it into the stationary cylinder **48**. The hopper **26** is positioned adjacent to the stationary cylinder **48**, and preferably centered with the stationary cylinder **48**. In the preferred embodiment, the hopper **26** has an opening directed upwards for loading of the prepared meat product **46** and urging of the prepared meat product **46** into the stationary cylinder **48** by gravitational force. The diameter of the hopper **26** where it provides access to the stationary cylinder **48** may be

in the range of 13.5 inches to 14.8 inches, and preferably about 13.5 inches. The hopper **26** may preferably be positioned on the front panel **22** to provide access to the stationary cylinder **48** and the impeller **34** as needed, for example, for maintenance or cleaning.

[0021] In the preferred embodiment, the housing **14** also comprises a feeder chute **28**. The feeder chute **28** is attached to the hopper **26** to provide an extended and more covered access route for the prepared meat product to reach the stationary cylinder **48**. The access opening of the feeder chute **28** may be vertically aligned or preferably facing generally upwards. In one embodiment, the feeder chute **28** is generally circular with an opening generally equal to that of the hopper **26** at its distal end where the chute **28** meets the hopper **26**. Alternatively, in the preferred embodiment, the feeder chute **28** starts with a generally square opening, preferably about 13.5 inches on each side, and ends with an opening generally equal to that of the hopper **26** at its distal end where the chute **28** meets the hopper **26**.

[0022] The housing **14** also may include a discharge chute **30**. The discharge chute **30** is positioned below the knife assembly **52** to direct the discharge of the meat slices **46a** from the rotary processing machine **10**. The discharge chute **30** may be downward facing. The distal end of the discharge chute **30** may be in the range of 10 inches to 20 inches above the floor, and preferably about 15 inches. This preferable height from the floor provides the discharge chute **30** with a sufficient height to accommodate larger slices produced by the processing machine **10**. It may be of a generally rectangular shape with a width equal to or larger than the width of the stationary cylinder **48**, and preferably in the range of 13 inches to 15 inches, and more preferably about 13.7 inches. The length of the distal end of the discharge chute **30** may be in the range of 5 inches to 15 inches, and preferably about 10 inches. In one embodiment, the discharge chute **30** is attached to the housing **14** directly below the knife assembly **52** and angles away from the rotary processing machine **10**, so that the distal end of the discharge chute **30** is spaced from the frame **12** in the range of about 4 inches to 12 inches, and preferably in the range of 8 inches to 9 inches. In addition, the discharge chute **30** preferably does not contain any obstructions in order to provide an easier discharge path for the meat slices **46a**.

[0023] The impeller **34** includes a pair of rotating end discs **36, 38** interconnected by the paddles **40**. The paddles **40** are equally spaced around the interior circumference of the end discs **36, 38**. The impeller **34** is rotatably attached in the housing **14**. The paddles **40** are preferably attached perpendicular to the end discs **36, 38**. The paddles may be orientated generally radially, or alternatively, they may be angled toward the direction of rotation of the impeller **34**. This angle can be between 0 and 55 degrees from radial in the direction of rotation of the impeller **34**, and preferably about 30 degrees. The paddles **40** may preferably start at the outer edge of the impeller **34** or, alternatively, start in a range up to 1 inch from the edge. The paddles **40** have a length in the range of 3 inches to 6 inches, and preferably 4 to 5 inches. This preferable length allows the meat product **46** to tumble and present different oriented slicing surfaces to the slicing knife **56**. In one embodiment, the impeller **34** has between two and six paddles **40**, and preferably between three and five paddles **40**. In the most preferred embodiment, the impeller **34** has four paddles **40**.

[0024] The motor **42** drives the rotation of the impeller **34**, such as in a direction indicated by the arrow **44**. The motor **42** can operate at any feasible hertz level, and preferably in a range from 60 to 75 hertz, and more preferably 75 hertz. In addition, the motor **42** can operate at any feasible horsepower, and preferably at 10 horsepower. The motor **42** may preferably be supplied voltage across the line or, alternatively, by a variable frequency drive.

[0025] As the motor **42** causes the impeller **34** to rotate, the paddles **40** contact the prepared meat product **46** and cause it to rotate along with the impeller **34** in the direction of the arrow **44**. As a result of the rotation, centrifugal force presses the prepared meat product **46** against the inner surface **50** of the stationary cylinder **48**. The paddles **40**, in turn, drive the prepared food product **46** around the inner surface **50** of the stationary cylinder **48**. Because the rotary cutting machine **10** does not restrain or control the position of the prepared meat product **46** beyond the application of centrifugal force, the prepared food product **46** can tumble and fall within the impeller **34**. As a result of this process, the prepared meat product **46** is pressed against the inner surface **50** of the stationary cylinder **48** in random and different orientations as it is driven by the paddles **40** of the impeller **34**.

[0026] The degree of random and different orientations can be increased depending upon the amount of meat product **46** present in the impeller **34**. For example, having more meat products **46** in the impeller **34** than the number of paddles **40** can advantageously result in the excess meat products **46** accumulating in a lower region of the cylinder **48**. After a meat product **46** has been sliced, the meat product **46** can continue to rotated toward the lower region where the accumulated meat products **46** can cause the just-sliced meat product **46** to become dislodged from adjacent the paddle **40**. Another meat product **46** can then take the place of the just-sliced meat product **46**. When the just-sliced meat product **46** is subsequently advanced by the same of a different paddle **40**, it can be in a different orientation than if it had continued to rotate by the same paddle **40**, and thereby the next time it is sliced, a differently shaped slice can be cut.

[0027] As the prepared meat product **46** is driven around the inner surface **50** of the stationary cylinder **48**, it encounters the knife assembly **52**, as shown in FIG. 5. The knife assembly **52** includes the opening **54** and the slicing knife **56**.

[0028] The opening **54** is formed in the stationary cylinder **48** by spacing the side of the opening **54** positioned earlier in the path of rotation of the impeller **34** from the outer periphery of the impeller **34**. The opening **54** can be formed anywhere on the stationary cylinder **48**, and preferably is formed at a position of the stationary cylinder **48** where the rotation of the impeller **34** is in a generally downward direction and, more preferably, where the velocity of the prepared meat product **46** is generally perpendicular with the floor. The opening **54** preferably spans the width of the stationary cylinder **48** and is preferably generally horizontal. Alternatively, the opening **54** may be formed in the stationary cylinder **48** at an angle in the range of 45 degrees above or below horizontal.

[0029] In the preferred embodiment, the width of the opening **54** can be adjusted by a control knob **58**. The control knob **58** is preferably adjacent to the opening **54** and attached to the side of the opening **54** spaced from the outer periphery of the impeller **34**. To adjust the width of the opening **54**, the control knob **58** can adjust the distance the side of the opening **54** is spaced from the outer periphery of the impeller **34**. The control knob **58** can vary the width of the opening **54** in a range from 1/16 inch to 1 inch,

and preferably the opening **54** is set between 1/8 inch and 3/16 inch. The width of the opening **54** set by the control knob **58** determines the maximum thickness of the meat slices **46a** produced by the rotary processing machine **10**.

[0030] The slicing knife **56** is positioned at the side of the opening **54** that extends along the outer periphery of the impeller **34**. In the preferred embodiment, the slicing knife **56** is removably positioned at the opening **54**. The removably attached slicing knife **56** may then be removed and inserted as needed, for example, to select a different type of the slicing knife **56**, with a scalloped blade being preferred, to repair or maintain the slicing knife **56**, or to replace the slicing knife **56**. The slicing knife **56** preferably spans the length of the opening **54** and is positioned to provide the first point of contact for the meat product **46** as it is driven into the opening **54** by the impeller **34**. As the paddles **40** drive the meat product **46** to the opening **54**, the meat product **46** is driven beyond the outer periphery of the impeller **34** due to the spacing of the opening **54**. As the paddle **40** continues to rotate, the meat product **46** is driven into the slicing knife **56** which is positioned at the outer periphery of the impeller **34**, producing meat slices **46a** of thickness determined by the width of the opening **54**.

[0031] The slicing knife **56** may further comprise a guide surface **60**. As the slicing knife **56** cuts into the prepared meat product **46**, meat slices **46a** are produced, and the guide surface **60** can direct the meat slices **46a** away from the knife assembly **52** and towards the discharge chute **30**.

[0032] The knife assembly **52** may further comprise the circular knife assembly **62**, as shown in FIG. 6. The circular knife assembly **62** comprises at least one circular blade **68** mounted on a rotatable shaft **64** and is positioned in a direction that is generally parallel to the process feed direction. The circular knife assembly **62** is rotatably mounted to the housing **14** to preferably rotate in a direction as indicated by the arrow **66**. The circular knife assembly **62** is preferably downstream and proximal to the slicing knife **56**. As the meat slices **46a** are produced, they may travel down the guide surface **60** of the slicing knife **56**. While on the guide surface **60**, the at least one circular blade **68** may then further reduce the size of the meat slices **46a**.

[0033] In the preferred embodiment, the circular knife assembly **62** has dulled circular blades **68**. The circular blades **68** may be artificially dulled by any method, or

preferably, the circular blades **68** may be allowed to dull naturally and are not sharpened. The dulled circular blades **68** may then reduce the meat slice **46a** size while still producing meat slices **46a** with irregular edges consistent with the appearance of "home-style" carved meat. The dull circular blades **68** provide a natural cut by pulling the muscle fibers of the sliced meat product **46a**.

[0034] The circular knife assembly **62** may alternatively contain feed discs **70** to assist in advancing the meat slices **46a**. The feed discs **70** may be mounted on the rotatable shaft **64** in place of any number of the circular blades **68**.

[0035] The circular knife assembly **62** may consist of between one and fifteen circular blades **68**, and preferably one circular blade **68**, depending on the size of the prepared meat product **46** being used and the size of the meat slices **46a** desired. The chosen number of blades **68** having different spacings therebetween to cut the meat slices **46a** into further reduced sizes of varying widths. As illustrated in FIG. 5, a first spacer **72** creates a gap or space of length 'a,' and a second spacer **74** creates a gap of length 'b.' The spacers **72**, **74** can be alternated every other one, such that the spacing between the blades **68** is also alternating between a space of length 'a' and 'b,' or, alternatively, may be placed in any other suitable combination. The blade **68** spacing may be varied from 1/8 inch to 1 inch. For any number of the circular blades **68** not used, the feed discs **70** may be positioned on the rotatable shaft **64** instead. Preferably, the circular knife assembly **62** is composed of two circular blades **68** spaced apart by 3 inches and centered on the rotatable shaft **64** having 3/4 inch spacers **72**, **74** running the length of the rotatable shaft **64**. The remaining spaces between the spacers **72**, **74** on the rotatable shaft **64** preferably have feed discs **70**.

[0036] The knife assembly **52** may also comprise the cross cut knife assembly **76**. The cross cut knife assembly **76** is positioned in a direction that is generally parallel to the process feed direction. The cross cut knife assembly **76** can be comprised of a number of cross cut blades **78** in the range of 1 to 14, and preferably 2. The cross cut blades **78** preferably run the length of the cross cut knife assembly **76** and are positioned generally parallel to the process feed direction. The cross cut knife assembly **76** is rotatably mounted to the housing **14** to preferably rotate in a direction as indicated by the arrow **80**. The cross cut knife assembly **76** is preferably downstream and

proximal to the slicing knife **56**. As the meat slices **46a** are produced, they may travel down the guide surface **60** of the slicing knife **56**. As the meat slices advance beyond the end of the guide surface **60**, the cross cut blades **78** may then further reduce the size of the meat slices **46a**.

[0037] In the preferred embodiment, the cross cut knife assembly **76** has dulled cross cut blades **78**. The cross cut blades **78** may be artificially dulled by any method, or preferably, the cross cut blades **78** may be allowed to dull naturally and are not sharpened. The dulled cross cut blades **78** may then reduce the meat slice **46a** size while still producing meat slices **46a** with irregular edges consistent with the appearance of "home-style" carved meat. The dull cross cut blades **78** provide a natural cut by pulling the muscle fibers of the sliced meat product **46a**.

[0038] With reference to the diagram of FIG. 1, a bulk meat product is first selected for processing by the processing machine. The bulk meat product can be selected from any variety of meat product, including, for example, ham, turkey, chicken, or beef. Once the bulk meat product is selected, it can then be prepared for processing. This preparation can first include chilling the bulk meat product to the required temperature. This may include storing the bulk meat product at the desired temperature or instead chilling the bulk meat product further to reach the desired temperature. The meat product should be kept at a temperature below 40 degrees Fahrenheit for food safety purposes, and preferably, the meat product should have a temperature in the range of 30 to 35 degrees Fahrenheit when processed by the processing machine. Alternatively, the bulk meat product can be cooked or heated prior to processing. This may include cooking the meat product by any suitable means. This preparation can also include removing the bulk meat product from any casing or wrapping used to store and ship the product. This preparation may ensure that the meat product is free of any foreign material to keep any foreign material out of the final sliced product. Another option for preparation includes breaking down the bulk meat product prior to processing. The bulk meat product may be broken down by hand or other suitable means. However, it has been found that breaking down formulated turkey into smaller portions before processing can create a good, but small end product. In any case, the prepared meat product is preferably about 10 inches in any dimension or less. Finally, the total

amount of meat product may be selected. The amount of meat product selected is dependent on the amount of output slices desired and can be in a range of one meat product to more than 20 with each load into the processing machine.

[0039] A next step can include selecting a slicing knife. The slicing knife can have any type of edge, including, for example, a scalloped or a wavy edge. Once the slicing knife is selected, it may then be inserted into the processing machine. As disclosed above, inserting the slicing knife into the processing machine positions the knife at the opening formed in the stationary cylinder.

[0040] Next, a desired slice thickness can be determined. As disclosed above, the slice thickness may be in the range of 1/16 inch to 1 inch. The desired slice thickness may vary depending on the selected type of meat or the application of the desired output. Once selected, the slice thickness may then be represented on the processing machine. To alter the thickness of the slices produced by the processing machine, the width of the opening can be adjusted. The control knob is operably attached to the opening to adjust the width thereof. The slice thickness corresponds to the distance between the slicing knife and the side of the opening spaced from the outer periphery of the impeller.

[0041] The following step may include determining a desired slice width. This width may be as large as the selected bulk meat product or the broken down selected meat product, or as small as 1/8 inch as disclosed in the discussion of the circular knife assembly above. The desired slice width may vary depending on the type of the selected meat product or the application of the product intended to be produced by the processing machine. Once the desired slice width is determined, it can then be determined whether a circular knife assembly is needed. If the desired slice width is less than any dimension of the prepared meat product, the circular knife assembly may be used to further reduce the width. If the circular knife assembly is required, its setup must then be determined. This includes choosing the number of pre-dulled circular blades desired and the spacing between the pre-dulled circular blades. After the desired number of blades and spacing is determined, then the type of spacers and number of feed discs can be ascertained. Once all of the circular knife assembly materials are chosen, they may be mounted on a rotatable shaft. The assembled

circular knife assembly may then be rotatably attached to the housing of the processing machine proximal to and downstream of the slicing knife.

[0042] Another step may include determining a desired slice height. This height may be as large as the height of the selected bulk meat product or the broken down selected meat product, or instead, a smaller slice may be desired. If a smaller slice height is desired, a cross cut knife assembly may be used. If the cross cut knife assembly is required, its setup must then be determined. This includes choosing the number of pre-dulled cross cut blades desired and the spacing between the pre-dulled cross cut blades, and preferably two evenly spaced dulled cross cut blades. The cross cut knife assembly may then be rotatably attached to the housing of the processing machine proximal to and downstream of the slicing knife.

[0043] Next, the processing machine may be started. A desired speed of rotation of the impeller may then be determined. The speed of the rotation of impeller influences the magnitude of the centrifugal force applied on the prepared meat product while in the impeller and, similarly, it may also influence the tumbling and orientation of the meat products while in the impeller. This process determines the edge of the meat product from which the slices are produced. If a desired speed is determined, the speed of rotation of the impeller may then be set. The available speeds may vary with the type of motor operating the processing machine, and preferably the motor can operate at 75 hertz.

[0044] The processing machine comprised of a housing, a motor, an impeller, and a knife assembly may then use the impeller having at least one paddle to rotatably drive the prepared meat product around the housing, the prepared meat product held to the housing by centrifugal force, to impact the knife assembly to create irregularly shaped meat slices.

[0045] The selected and prepared meat product can then be loaded into the processing machine. The machine operates as detailed above to output mass-scale "home-style" slices of meat of irregular shape and size. As the slices of meat are output by the processing machine, they can be collected. This may be done by placing a bag or collection bin under the discharge chute. Finally, the collected slices can be packaged.

EXAMPLES

[0046] The following examples illustrate presently preferred methods and should be understood to be illustrative of, but not limiting upon, the scope of the apparatus and method which are set forth in the appended claims.

[0047] For the following tests, the processing machine had an impeller with four equally spaced paddles, a ten horsepower motor operating at sixty hertz across the line, and a scalloped slicing knife with a 3/16 inch slice thickness. Two bags of bulk meat product, removed from the plastic casing, were used in the tests.

Test	Meat	Temp.	Prep.	Result
1	Ham Loaves	32° F	Whole	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
2	Ham Loaves	35° F	Broken into pieces by hand	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
3	Ham Loaves	35° F	Whole	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
4	Formulated Turkey	30° F	Whole	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
5	Formulated Turkey	30° F	Broken into pieces by hand	Very Small Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
6	K Butt Tumbled Ham Loaves	32° F	Broken into pieces by hand	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
7	K Butt Not Tumbled Ham Loaves	32° F	Broken into pieces by hand	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size

[0048] For the following tests, the processing machine had an impeller with four equally spaced paddles, a ten horsepower motor operating at sixty hertz across the line, a scalloped insert knife with a 3/16 inch slice thickness, and a circular knife assembly. The circular knife assembly had one circular blade at 5 1/4 inches and feed discs positioned at the remaining spaces between the 3/4 inch spacers. Two bags of bulk meat product, removed from the plastic casing, were used in the tests.

Test	Meat	Temp.	Prep.	Result
8	Formulated Turkey	38° F	Whole	Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
9	Ham Loaves	34° F	Broken into pieces	Very Good Slices of

			by hand	Irregular Shape and Size
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[0049] For the final test, the processing machine had an impeller with four equally spaced paddles, a ten horsepower motor operating at seventy five hertz across the line, a scalloped insert knife with a 1/8 inch slice thickness, and a circular knife assembly. The circular knife assembly had one circular blade at 5 1/4 inches and feed discs positioned at the remaining spaces between the 3/4 inch spacers. Two bags of bulk meat product, removed from the plastic casing, were used in the test.

Test	Meat	Temp.	Prep.	Result
10	Ham Loaves	34° F	Whole	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size

[0050] For the following tests, the processing machine had an impeller with four equally spaced paddles, a ten horsepower motor operating at 75 hertz across the line, a scalloped slicing knife with a 3/16 inch slice thickness, and a circular knife assembly. The circular knife assembly had two dulled circular blades one 3 inches from either end of the rotatable shaft and feed discs positioned at the remaining spaces between the 3/4 inch spacers. Four pieces of bulk meat product were used in the tests.

Test	Meat	Temp.	Prep.	Result
11	Chicken – Slit casing	31° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
12	Chicken	31° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
13	Turkey – Slit casing	31° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
14	Turkey	31° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
15	Ham – Split Top	31° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
16	Ham	31° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
17	Beef – Split Top	31° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
18	Turkey Breasts Halved	31° F	Halved, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
19	Chicken Breasts	31° F	In 12 pieces,	Very Good Slices of

			drained juices	Irregular Shape and Size
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[0051] For the following tests, the processing machine had an impeller with four equally spaced paddles, a ten horsepower motor operating at 75 hertz across the line, a scalloped slicing knife with a 1/2 inch slice thickness, a circular knife assembly, and a cross cut knife assembly. The circular knife assembly had dulled circular blades at every 1 1/2 inches and feed discs positioned at the remaining spaces between the 3/4 inch spacers. Four pieces of bulk meat product were used in the tests.

Test	Meat	Temp.	Prep.	Result
20	Beef	97° F	Whole, drained juices	Chunk style shreads
21	Ham	125° F	Whole, drained juices	Chunk style shreads
22	Ham	120° F	Whole, drained juices	Chunk style shreads
23	Beef	135° F	Whole, drained juices	Chunk style shreads

[0052] For the following tests, the processing machine had an impeller with four equally spaced paddles, a ten horsepower motor operating at 75 hertz across the line, a scalloped slicing knife with a 3/16 inch slice thickness, a circular knife assembly, and a cross cut knife assembly. The circular knife assembly had dulled circular blades spaced 3 3/4 inches from each end of the rotatable shaft and feed discs positioned at the remaining spaces between the 3/4 inch spacers. The cross cut knife assembly had two dulled cross cut blades positioned on opposite sides of the assembly. Two pieces of bulk meat product were used in the tests.

Test	Meat	Temp.	Prep.	Result
24	Ham	33° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
25	Ham	33° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
26	Ham	33° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
27	Ham	33° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size

28	Turkey	33° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size
29	Turkey	33° F	Whole, drained juices	Very Good Slices of Irregular Shape and Size

[0053] For the foregoing, it will be appreciated that apparatus and methods are described herein for manufacturing irregularly shaped and sized food products. While the figures and description herein are illustrative of certain aspects of methods and apparatus for manufacturing irregularly shaped and sized food products, the apparatus and methods are not limited to the aspects illustrated in the figures and described hereinabove. For example, while the description generally refers to meat as the product being produced in irregular shapes and sizes, it is understood that a process according to the present description may be used for other suitable products.

[0054] It will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that modifications to the foregoing preferred embodiments may be made in various aspects. The present invention is set forth with particularity in any appended claims. It is deemed that the spirit and scope of that invention encompasses such modifications and alterations to the preferred embodiment as would be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art and familiar with the teachings of the present application.

CLAIMS:

1. A method of creating randomly sized slices of meat from a plurality of meat products, the method including:

rotating a plurality of meat products using an impeller having a plurality of inwardly extending paddles, the plurality of meat products exceeding the plurality of paddles;

directing one of the meat products toward a slicing blade during rotation of the impeller by lodging the one of the meat products against one of the paddles and against the impeller using centrifugal force from the rotation of the impeller;

urging the one of the meat products against the slicing blade using the one of the paddles to cut a slice of meat from the one of the meat products; and

dislodging the one of the meat products from against the one of the paddles using others of the plurality of meat products, so that the one of the meat products has a different orientation with a subsequent urging against the slicing blade for creating randomly sized slices of non-uniform meat product.

2. The method of claim 1, further including the step of cutting the slice of meat after the step of urging the one of the meat products against the slicing blade using the one of the paddles to cut the slice of meat to reduce the width of the slice of meat and form smaller width slices of meat.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein the step of cutting the slice of meat further includes using one or more rotating blades to cut the slice of meat.

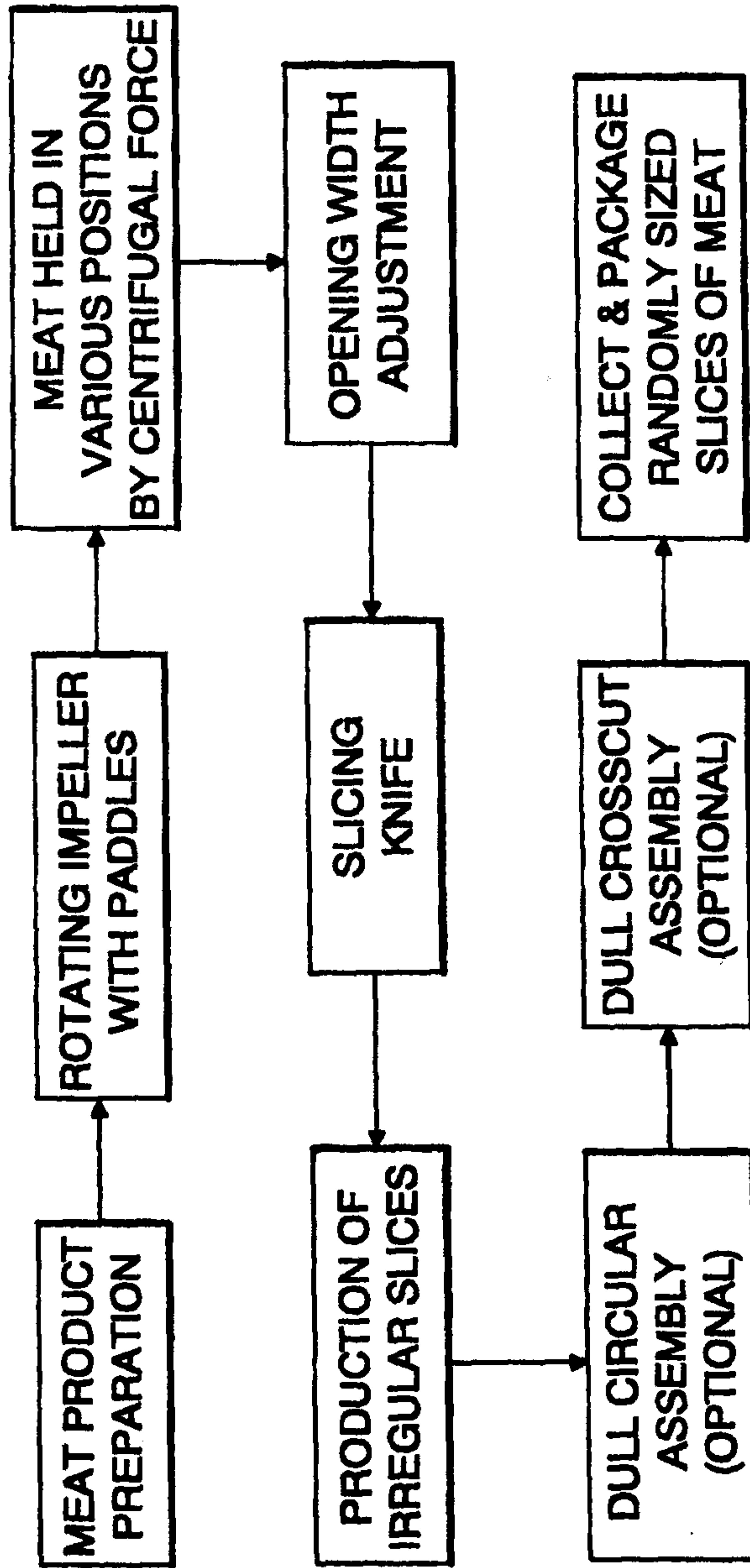
4. The method of claim 3, wherein at least one of the one or more rotating blades is dulled.

5. The method of claim 4, further including the step of packaging the smaller width slices of meat.

6. The method of claim 1, further including the step of lodging a different meat product than the one meat product against the one of the paddles following the

step of dislodging the one of the meat products from against the one of the paddles using others of the plurality of meat products.

Fig. 1



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Fig. 2

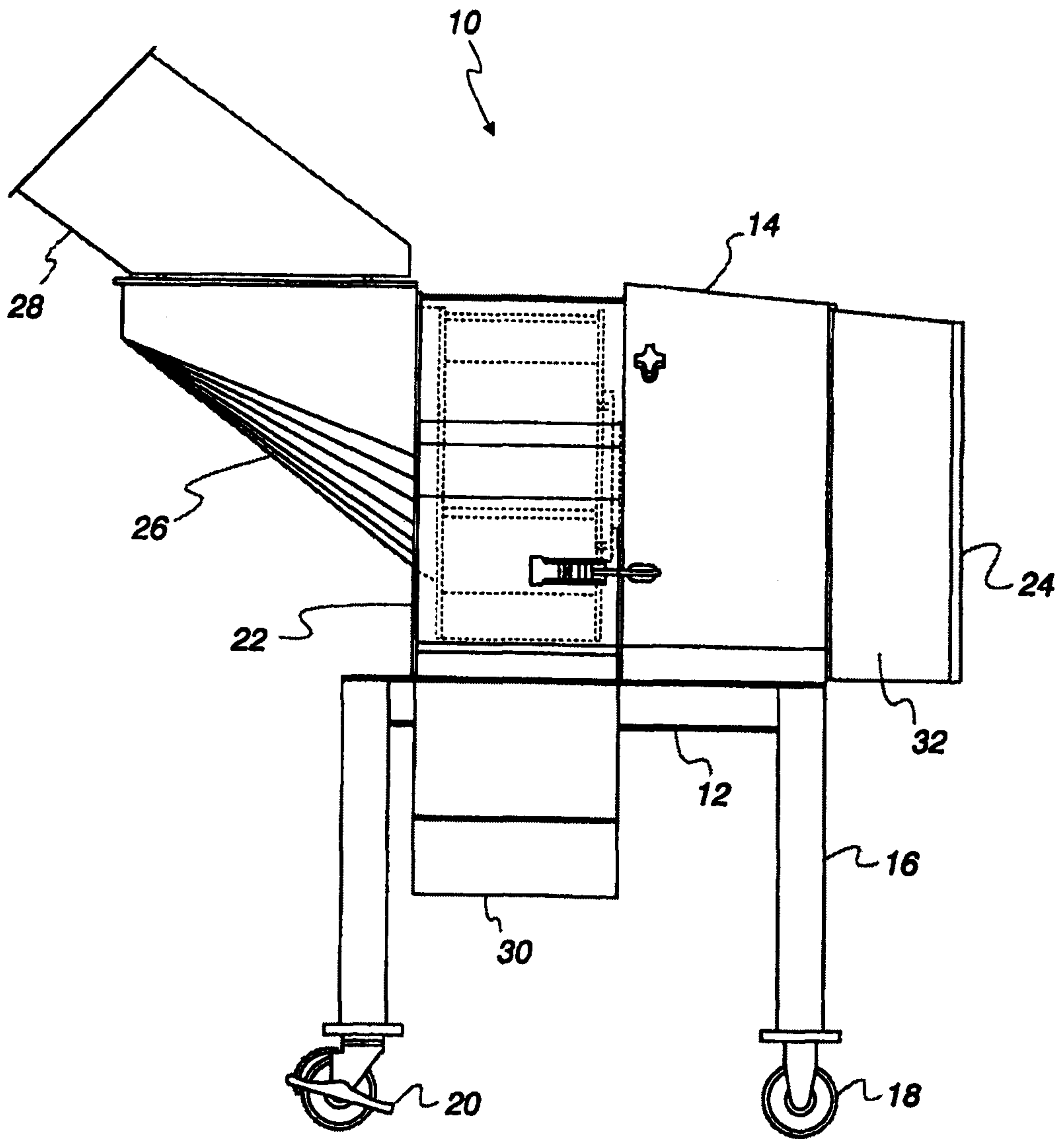


Fig. 3

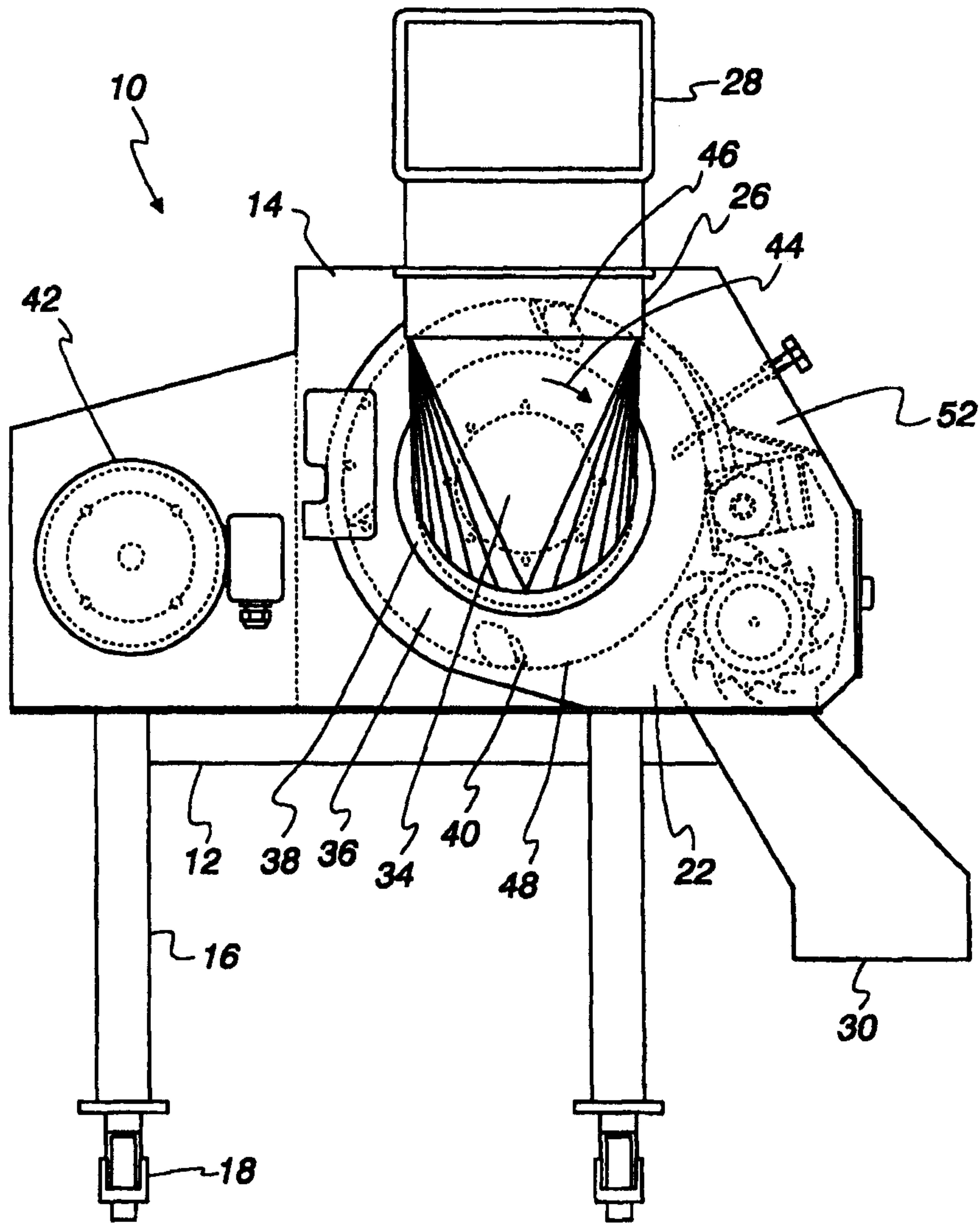
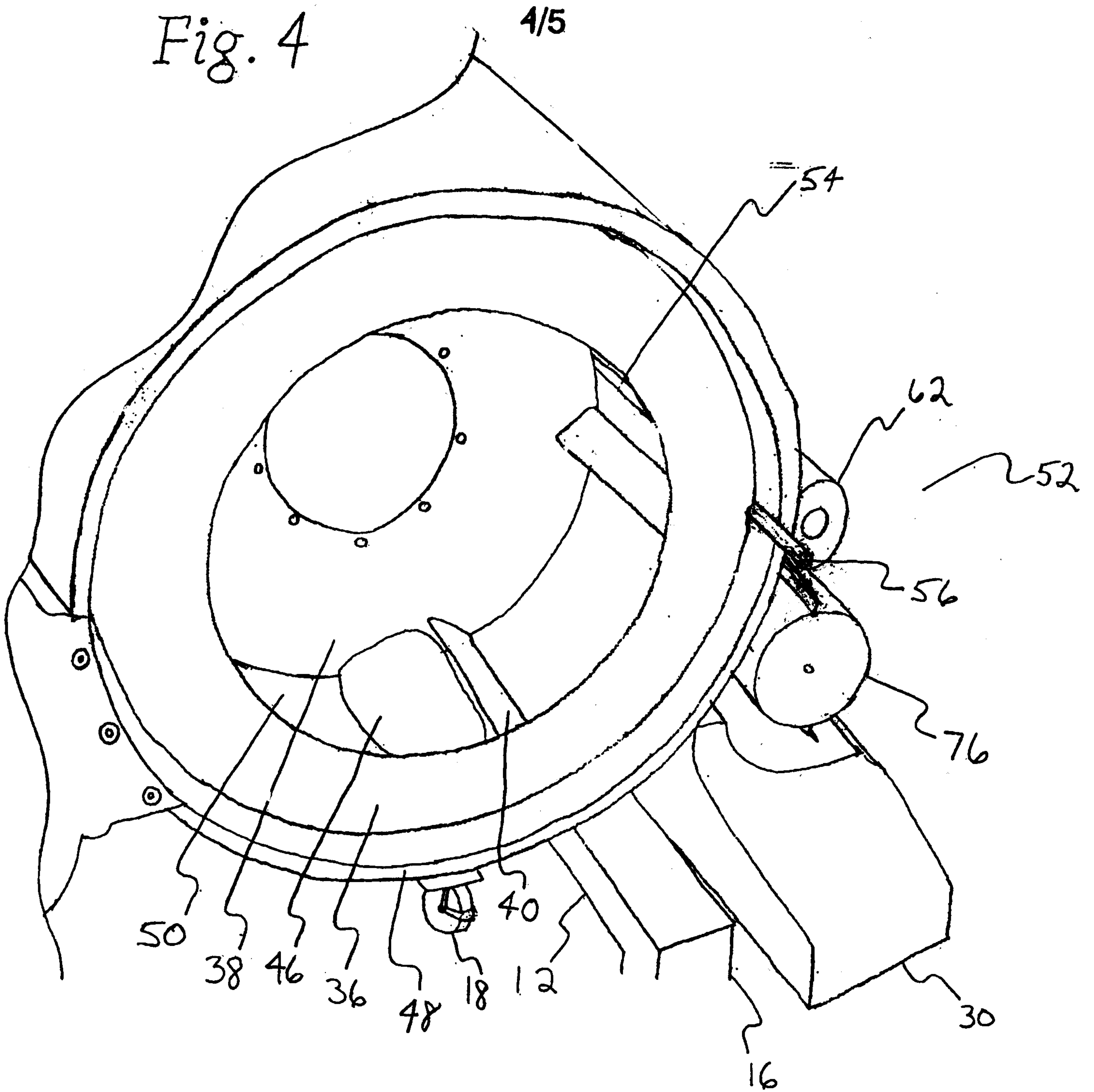


Fig. 4



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Fig. 5

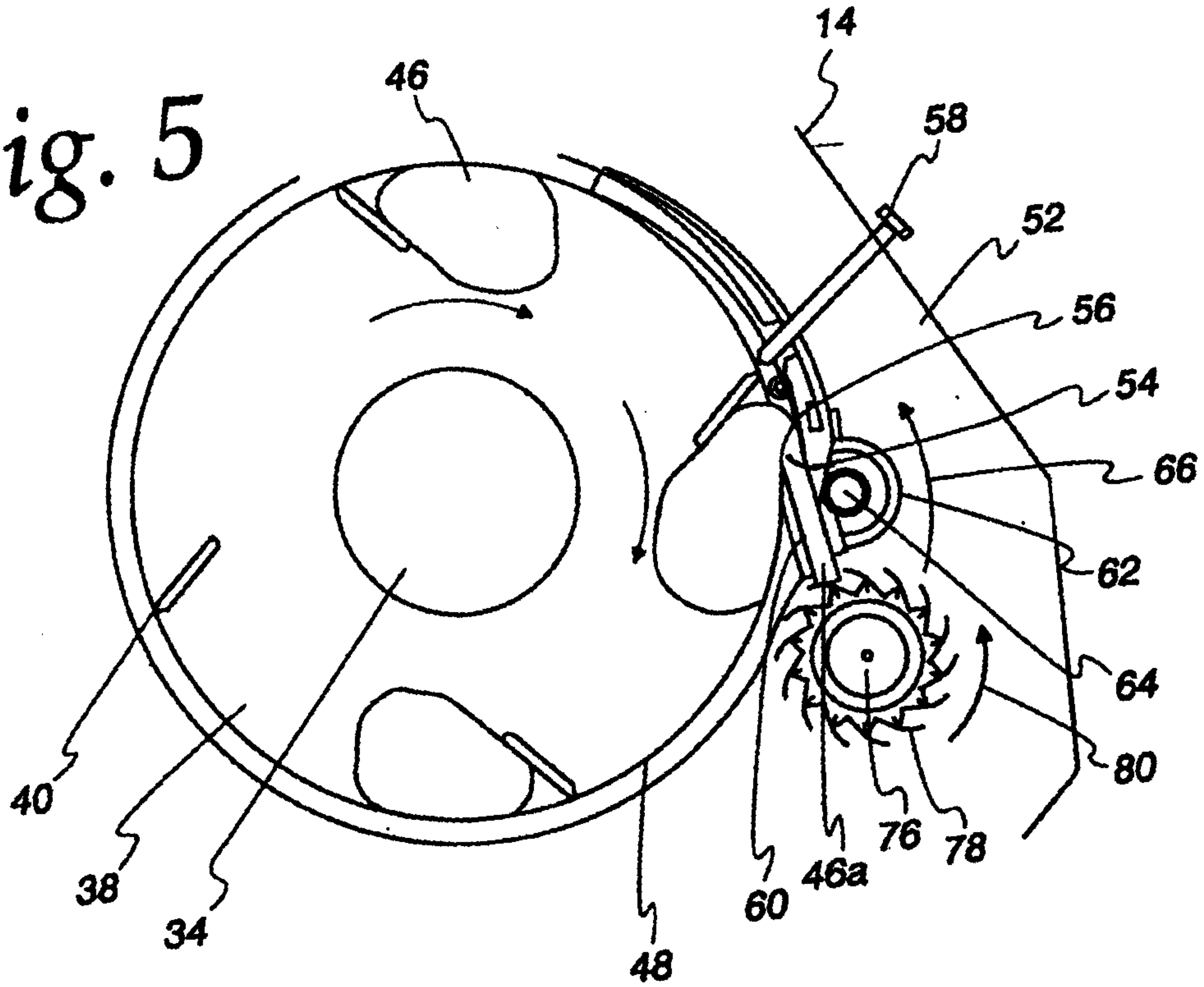


Fig. 6

