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(54) **Title:** PROCESS TO REDUCE ETHANOL RECYCLED TO HYDROGENATION REACTOR

(57) **Abstract:** The present invention is directed to processes for recovering ethanol obtained from the hydrogenation of acetic acid. Acetic acid is hydrogenated in the presence of a catalyst in a hydrogenation reactor to form a crude ethanol product. The crude ethanol product is separated in one or more columns to recover ethanol. In some embodiments, less than 10 wt.% ethanol is recycled to the hydrogenation reactor.

PROCESS TO REDUCE ETHANOL RECYCLED TO HYDROGENATION REACTOR

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application claims priority to U.S. Prov. App. No. 61/576,190, filed on December 15, 2011. This application also claims priority to U.S. App. No. 13/292,914, filed on November 9, 2011, and U.S. App. No. 13/094,588, filed on April 26, 2011.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates generally to improving the recovery of ethanol using distillation columns and, in particular, to a process for reducing the ethanol recycled to the hydrogenation reactor.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Ethanol for industrial use is conventionally produced from organic feed stocks, such as petroleum oil, natural gas, or coal, from feed stock intermediates, such as syngas, or from starchy materials or cellulosic materials, such as corn or sugar cane. Conventional methods for producing ethanol from organic feed stocks, as well as from cellulosic materials, include the acid-catalyzed hydration of ethylene, methanol homologation, direct alcohol synthesis, and Fischer-Tropsch synthesis. Instability in organic feed stock prices contributes to fluctuations in the cost of conventionally produced ethanol, making the need for alternative sources of ethanol production all the greater when feed stock prices rise. Starchy materials, as well as cellulosic materials, are converted to ethanol by fermentation. However, fermentation is typically used for consumer production of ethanol, which is suitable for fuels or human consumption. In addition, fermentation of starchy or cellulosic materials competes with food sources and places restraints on the amount of ethanol that can be produced for industrial use.

[0004] Ethanol production via the reduction of alkanolic acids and/or other carbonyl group-containing compounds has been widely studied, and a variety of combinations of catalysts, supports, and operating conditions have been mentioned in the literature. During the reduction of alkanolic acids, e.g., acetic acid, other compounds are formed with ethanol or are formed in side reactions. These impurities limit the production and recovery of ethanol from such reaction mixtures. For example, during hydrogenation, esters are produced that together with ethanol

and/or water form azeotropes, which are difficult to separate. In addition, when conversion is incomplete, acid remains in the crude ethanol stream, which must be removed to recover ethanol.

[0005] EP02060553 describes a process for converting hydrocarbons to ethanol involving converting the hydrocarbons to ethanoic acid and hydrogenating the ethanoic acid to ethanol. The stream from the hydrogenation reactor is separated to obtain an ethanol stream and a stream of acetic acid and ethyl acetate, which is recycled to the hydrogenation reactor.

[0006] US Pat. No. 7,842,844 describes a process for improving selectivity and catalyst activity and operating life for the conversion of hydrocarbons to ethanol and optionally acetic acid in the presence of a particulate catalyst, said conversion proceeding via a syngas generation intermediate step.

[0007] The need remains for improved processes for recovering ethanol from a crude product obtained by reducing alkanolic acids, such as acetic acid, and/or other carbonyl group-containing compounds.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] In a first embodiment, the present invention is directed to a process for producing ethanol, comprising hydrogenating acetic acid and/or an ester thereof in a reactor in the presence of a catalyst to form a crude ethanol stream, separating a portion of the crude ethanol stream in a first distillation column to yield a first distillate comprising acetaldehyde, ethyl acetate, and ethanol, and a first residue comprising ethanol and ethyl acetate, separating a portion of the first residue in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and a second distillate comprising ethanol, and ethyl acetate, and recovering ethanol from the second distillate. In some embodiments, the first residue may comprise low amounts of acetic acid. In one embodiment, the process comprises separating at least a portion of the second distillate in a third distillation column to yield a third distillate comprising ethyl acetate and a third residue comprising ethanol. The first distillate is returned to the reactor and less than 10% of the ethanol, e.g., less than 5%, from the crude ethanol stream is returned to the reactor. In one embodiment, the first distillate is further separated to yield an ethanol stream and a raffinate stream comprising ethyl acetate and less than 2 wt.% ethanol. In further embodiments, the ethanol has a $^{14}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ratio of the acetic acid from 0.5 to 1 of the $^{14}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ratio for living organisms. A total diameter for the first distillation column, the second distillation column and

the third distillation column may be from 5 to 40 meters and further wherein a ratio of total column diameter for the first distillation column, the second distillation column and the third distillation column to tons of ethanol produced per hour is from 1:2 to 1:30.

[0009] In a second embodiment, the present invention is directed to a process for producing ethanol, comprising hydrogenating acetic acid and/or an ester thereof in a reactor in the presence of a catalyst to form a crude ethanol stream, separating a portion of the crude ethanol stream in a first distillation column to yield a first distillate comprising acetaldehyde, ethyl acetate and ethanol, wherein the first distillate has less than 10% of the ethanol, e.g., less than 5%, from the crude ethanol stream, and a first residue comprising ethanol, acetic acid, ethyl acetate and water, wherein the first residue has at least 90% of the ethanol, e.g., at least 95%, from the crude ethanol stream, separating a portion of the first residue in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and a second distillate comprising ethanol and ethyl acetate, and separating at least a portion of the second distillate in a third distillation column to yield a third distillate comprising ethyl acetate and a third residue comprising ethanol. The first distillate may be returned to the reactor.

[0010] In a third embodiment, the present invention is directed to a process for producing ethanol, comprising hydrogenating acetic acid and/or an ester thereof in a reactor in the presence of a catalyst to form a crude ethanol stream, separating a portion of the crude ethanol stream in a first distillation column to yield a first distillate comprising acetaldehyde, ethyl acetate and ethanol, and a first residue comprising ethanol and acetic acid, separating a portion of the first distillate to yield an ethanol stream and a raffinate stream comprising ethyl acetate, wherein the raffinate is returned to the reactor, separating a portion of the first residue in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and a second distillate comprising ethanol, and recovering ethanol from the second residue. In one embodiment, the process may comprise separating at least a portion of the second distillate in a third distillation column to yield a third distillate comprising ethyl acetate and a third residue comprising ethanol.

[0011] In a fourth embodiment, the present invention is directed to a process for producing ethanol, comprising hydrogenating acetic acid and/or an ester thereof in a reactor in the presence of a catalyst to form a crude ethanol stream, separating a portion of the crude ethanol stream in a first distillation column to yield a first distillate comprising acetaldehyde and ethyl acetate, and a first residue comprising ethanol, acetic acid and water, converting a portion of the first residue

into a partial vapor feed having less than 30 mol.%, preferably less than 25 mol.%, of the contents in the vapor phase, separating a portion of the partial vapor feed in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and an second distillate comprising ethanol, and recovering ethanol from the second distillate. The first residue may be converted to the partial vapor feed using a secondary reactor or secondary vaporizer. In one embodiment, the secondary reactor is a vapor phase esterification reactor.

[0012] In a fifth embodiment, the present invention is directed to a process for producing ethanol, comprising hydrogenating acetic acid and/or an ester thereof in a reactor in the presence of a catalyst to form a crude ethanol stream, separating a portion of the crude ethanol stream in a first distillation column to yield a first distillate comprising acetaldehyde, ethyl acetate and ethanol, and a first residue comprising ethanol, acetic acid, ethyl acetate and water, converting a portion of the first residue into a partial vapor feed having less than 30 mol.%, preferably less than 25 mol.%, of the contents in the vapor phase, separating a portion of the partial vapor feed in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and a second distillate comprising ethanol, and ethyl acetate, and recovering ethanol from the second distillate. In one embodiment, the process comprises separating at least a portion of the second distillate in a third distillation column to yield a third distillate comprising ethyl acetate and a third residue comprising ethanol. The first distillate is returned to the reactor and less than 10% of the ethanol, e.g., less than 5%, from the crude ethanol stream is returned to the reactor. In one embodiment, the first distillate is further separated to yield an ethanol stream and a raffinate stream comprising ethyl acetate and less than 2 wt.% ethanol.

[0013] In a sixth embodiment, the present invention is directed to a process for producing ethanol, comprising providing a crude ethanol stream, separating a portion of the crude ethanol stream in a first distillation column to yield a first distillate comprising acetaldehyde, ethyl acetate, and ethanol, and a first residue comprising ethanol and ethyl acetate, separating a portion of the first residue in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and a second distillate comprising ethanol, and ethyl acetate, and recovering ethanol from the second distillate. In some embodiments, the first residue may comprise low amounts of acetic acid. In one embodiment, the process comprises separating at least a portion of the second distillate in a third distillation column to yield a third distillate comprising ethyl acetate and a third residue comprising ethanol. The first distillate is returned to the reactor and less than 10%

of the ethanol, e.g., less than 5%, from the crude ethanol stream is returned to the reactor. In one embodiment, the first distillate is further separated to yield an ethanol stream and a raffinate stream comprising ethyl acetate and less than 2 wt.% ethanol. In further embodiments, the ethanol has a $^{14}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ratio of the acetic acid from 0.5 to 1 of the $^{14}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ratio for living organisms. A total diameter for the first distillation column, the second distillation column and the third distillation column may be from 5 to 40 meters and further wherein a ratio of total column diameter for the first distillation column, the second distillation column and the third distillation column to tons of ethanol produced per hour is from 1:2 to 1:30. The process may further comprise converting a portion of the first residue into a partial vapor feed having less than 30 mol.%, preferably less than 25 mol.%, of the contents in the vapor phase; separating a portion of the partial vapor feed in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and a second distillate comprising ethanol; and recovering ethanol from the second distillate.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0014] The invention may be more completely understood in consideration of the following detailed description of various embodiments of the invention in connection with the accompanying drawings, wherein like numerals designate similar parts.

[0015] FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of an ethanol production system with multiple distillation columns to recover ethanol including an acid column and water separator in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

[0016] FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram of an ethanol production system with multiple distillation columns having a process for vaporizing at least a portion of the feed to the second column in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0017] The present invention relates to processes for recovering ethanol produced by hydrogenating acetic acid in the presence of a catalyst. The hydrogenation reaction produces a crude ethanol stream that comprises ethanol, water, ethyl acetate, acetaldehyde, and other impurities. The processes of the present invention involve separating the crude ethanol stream in a first column into a residue stream comprising ethanol, water, ethyl acetate and acetic acid and a distillate stream comprising acetaldehyde and ethyl acetate. The first column primarily removes light organics in the distillate and returns those organics for subsequent hydrogenation. Even though a majority of the ethanol is removed in the residue stream to yield an ethanol product, some of the ethanol is withdrawn with the distillate and the first distillate is recycled to the reactor.

[0018] In one embodiment, it is preferred to return to the reactor less than 10% of the ethanol from the crude ethanol stream, e.g., less than 5% or less than 1%. In terms of ranges, the amount of returned ethanol is from 0.01 to 10% of the ethanol in the crude ethanol stream, e.g. from 0.1 to 5% or from 0.2 to 1%. In one embodiment, to reduce the amount of ethanol recycled, the present invention operates the first column to remove more ethanol in the residue, either using an extractive agent and/or pressure. In another embodiment, the distillate of the first residue may be extracted to withdraw ethanol and reduce the ethanol recycled to the hydrogenation reactor. Without reducing the ethanol recycled, more ethanol would pass through the hydrogenation reactor, causing an undesirable loss of ethanol productivity.

[0019] Advantageously, this separation approach results in reducing energy requirements to recover ethanol, in particular anhydrous ethanol for fuel grade ethanol, from the crude ethanol stream.

[0020] In recovering ethanol, the processes of the present invention use one or more distillation columns. In preferred embodiments, the residue stream in the initial column, e.g., first column, comprises more ethanol than the distillate stream in the initial column. In some embodiments, the residue stream comprises a substantial portion of the ethanol, water and acetic acid from the crude ethanol stream. In terms of ranges, the residue stream may comprise from 50% to 99.9% of the ethanol from the crude ethanol product, e.g. 70% to 99.9%, or 90 to 99.5%. Preferably,

the amount of ethanol from the crude ethanol product recovered in the residue may be greater than 97.5%, e.g. greater than 99%.

[0021] The residue stream comprising ethanol, ethyl acetate, water and acetic acid may be further separated to recover ethanol. Because these compounds may not be in equilibrium, additional ethyl acetate may be produced through esterification of ethanol and acetic acid. In one preferred embodiment, the water and acetic acid may be removed as another residue stream in a separate distillation column. In addition, the water carried over in the separate distillation column may be removed with a water separator that is selected from the group consisting of an adsorption unit, membrane, extractive column distillation, molecular sieves, and combinations thereof.

[0022] Although ethyl acetate is partially withdrawn into the first distillate, a higher ethyl acetate concentration in the first residue leads to increased ethanol concentration in the first residue and decreased ethanol concentrations in the first distillate. Thus, overall ethanol recovery may be increased. Depending on the ethyl acetate concentration in the residue and whether there is *in situ* esterification in the residue or an esterification reactor, it may be necessary to further separate the ethyl acetate and ethanol in a separate column. Preferably, this separate column is located after the water has been removed using a distillation column and/or water separator. Generally, a separate column may be necessary when the residue comprises at least 50 wppm ethyl acetate or there is *in situ* esterification. When the ethyl acetate is less than 50 wppm, it may not be necessary to use separate column to separate ethyl acetate and ethanol.

[0023] Ethyl acetate may be separated from ethanol in a separate column near the end of the purification process. In removing ethyl acetate, additional light organics may also be removed, thus improving the quality of the ethanol product by decreasing impurities. Preferably, water and/or acetic acid may be removed prior to the ethyl acetate/ethanol separation. In one embodiment, after the ethyl acetate is separated from ethanol, the ethyl acetate is returned to the initial column and fed near the top of that column. This allows for any ethanol removed with the ethyl acetate to be recovered and further reduces the amount of ethanol being recycled to the reactor. In some embodiments, it is preferably to recycle ethanol within the separation zone but to decrease the amount of ethanol recycled to the reactor. Decreasing the amount of ethanol recycled to the reactor may reduce reactor capital and improve efficiency in recovering ethanol.

Preferably, the ethyl acetate is removed in the distillate of the first column and returned to the reactor with the acetaldehyde.

[0024] In preferred embodiments, the residue stream of the first column comprises a substantial portion of the water and the acetic acid from the crude ethanol stream. The residue stream may comprise at least 80% of the water from the crude ethanol stream, and more preferably at least 90%. In terms of ranges, the residue stream preferably comprises from 80% to 100% of the water from the crude ethanol stream, and more preferably from 90% to 99.4%. The residue stream may comprise at least 85% of the acetic acid from the crude ethanol stream, e.g., at least 90% and more preferably about 100%. In terms of ranges, the residue stream preferably comprises from 85% to 100% of the acetic acid from the crude ethanol stream, and more preferably from 90% to 100%. In one embodiment, substantially all of the acetic acid is recovered in the residue stream.

[0025] In one embodiment, each of the columns is sized to be capital and economically feasible for the rate of ethanol production. The total diameter for the columns used to separate the crude ethanol stream may be from 5 to 40 meters, e.g., from 10 to 30 meters or from 12 to 20 meters. Each column may have a varying size. In one embodiment, the ratio of column diameter in meters for all the distillation columns to tons of ethanol produced per hour is from 1:2 to 1:30, e.g., from 1:3 to 1:20 or from 1:4 to 1:10. This would allow the process to achieve production rates of 25 to 250 tons of ethanol per hour.

[0026] The distillate from the initial column comprises light organics, such as acetaldehyde, diethyl acetal, acetone and ethyl acetate. In addition, minor amounts of ethanol and water may be present in the distillate. Removing these light organic components from the crude ethanol stream in the initial column provides an efficient means for removing acetaldehyde and ethyl acetate. In addition, acetaldehyde, diethyl acetal and acetone are not carried over with the ethanol when multiple columns are used, thus reducing the formation of byproducts from acetaldehyde, diethyl acetal, and acetone. In particular, acetaldehyde and/or ethyl acetate may be returned to the reactor, and converted to additional ethanol. In another embodiment, a purge may remove these light organics from the system.

[0027] The residue from the initial column comprises ethyl acetate. Although ethyl acetate is also partially withdrawn into the first distillate, a higher ethyl acetate concentration in the first residue leads to increased ethanol concentration in the first residue and decrease ethanol

concentrations in the first distillate. Thus overall ethanol recovery may be increased. Ethyl acetate may be separated from ethanol in a separate column near the end of the purification process. In removing ethyl acetate, additional light organics may also be removed and thus improve the quality of the ethanol product by decreasing impurities. Preferably, water and/or acetic acid may be removed prior to the ethyl acetate/ethanol separation.

[0028] In one embodiment, after the ethyl acetate is separated from ethanol, the ethyl acetate is returned to the initial column and fed near the top of that column. This allows for any ethanol removed with the ethyl acetate to be recovered and further reduces the amount of ethanol being recycled to the reactor. Decreasing the amount of ethanol recycled to the reactor may reduce reactor capital and improve efficiency in recovering ethanol. Preferably, the ethyl acetate is removed in the distillate of the first column and returned to the reactor with the acetaldehyde.

[0029] The process of the present invention may be used with any hydrogenation process for producing ethanol. The materials, catalysts, reaction conditions, and separation processes that may be used in the hydrogenation of acetic acid are described further below.

[0030] The raw materials, acetic acid and hydrogen, used in connection with the process of this invention may be derived from any suitable source including natural gas, petroleum, coal, biomass, and so forth. As examples, acetic acid may be produced via methanol carbonylation, acetaldehyde oxidation, ethane oxidation, oxidative fermentation, and anaerobic fermentation. Methanol carbonylation processes suitable for production of acetic acid are described in U.S. Pat. Nos. 7,208,624; 7,115,772; 7,005,541; 6,657,078; 6,627,770; 6,143,930; 5,599,976; 5,144,068; 5,026,908; 5,001,259; and 4,994,608, the entire disclosures of which are incorporated herein by reference. Optionally, the production of ethanol may be integrated with such methanol carbonylation processes.

[0031] As petroleum and natural gas prices fluctuate becoming either more or less expensive, methods for producing acetic acid and intermediates such as methanol and carbon monoxide from other carbon sources have drawn increasing interest. In particular, when petroleum is relatively expensive, it may become advantageous to produce acetic acid from synthesis gas (“syngas”) that is derived from other available carbon sources. U.S. Pat. No. 6,232,352, the entirety of which is incorporated herein by reference, for example, teaches a method of retrofitting a methanol plant for the manufacture of acetic acid. By retrofitting a methanol plant, the large capital costs associated with CO generation for a new acetic acid plant are significantly

reduced or largely eliminated. All or part of the syngas is diverted from the methanol synthesis loop and supplied to a separator unit to recover CO, which is then used to produce acetic acid. In a similar manner, hydrogen for the hydrogenation step may be supplied from syngas.

[0032] In some embodiments, some or all of the raw materials for the above-described acetic acid hydrogenation process may be derived partially or entirely from syngas. For example, the acetic acid may be formed from methanol and carbon monoxide, both of which may be derived from syngas. The syngas may be formed by partial oxidation reforming or steam reforming, and the carbon monoxide may be separated from syngas. Similarly, hydrogen that is used in the step of hydrogenating the acetic acid to form the crude ethanol stream may be separated from syngas. The syngas, in turn, may be derived from a variety of carbon sources. The carbon source, for example, may be selected from the group consisting of natural gas, oil, petroleum, coal, biomass, and combinations thereof. Syngas or hydrogen may also be obtained from bio-derived methane gas, such as bio-derived methane gas produced by landfills or agricultural waste.

[0033] Biomass-derived syngas has a detectable ^{14}C isotope content as compared to fossil fuels such as coal or natural gas. An equilibrium forms in the Earth's atmosphere between constant new formation and constant degradation, and so the proportion of the ^{14}C nuclei in the carbon in the atmosphere on Earth is constant over long periods. The same distribution ratio $n^{14}\text{C}:n^{12}\text{C}$ ratio is established in living organisms as is present in the surrounding atmosphere, which stops at death and ^{14}C decomposes at a half life of about 6000 years. Methanol, acetic acid and/or ethanol formed from biomass-derived syngas would be expected to have a ^{14}C content that is substantially similar to living organisms. For example, the $^{14}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ratio of the methanol, acetic acid and/or ethanol may be from one half to about 1 of the $^{14}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ratio for living organisms. In other embodiments, the syngas, methanol, acetic acid and/or ethanol described herein are derived wholly from fossil fuels, i.e. carbon sources produced over 60,000 years ago, may have no detectable ^{14}C content.

[0034] In another embodiment, the acetic acid used in the hydrogenation step may be formed from the fermentation of biomass. The fermentation process preferably utilizes an acetogenic process or a homoacetogenic microorganism to ferment sugars to acetic acid producing little, if any, carbon dioxide as a by-product. The carbon efficiency for the fermentation process preferably is greater than 70%, greater than 80% or greater than 90% as compared to conventional yeast processing, which typically has a carbon efficiency of about 67%.

Optionally, the microorganism employed in the fermentation process is of a genus selected from the group consisting of Clostridium, Lactobacillus, Moorella, Thermoanaerobacter, Propionibacterium, Propionispora, Anaerobiospirillum, and Bacteriodes, and in particular, species selected from the group consisting of Clostridium formicoaceticum, Clostridium butyricum, Moorella thermoacetica, Thermoanaerobacter kivui, Lactobacillus delbrukii, Propionibacterium acidipropionici, Propionispora arboris, Anaerobiospirillum succinicproduces, Bacteriodes amylophilus and Bacteriodes ruminicola. Optionally, in this process, all or a portion of the unfermented residue from the biomass, e.g., lignans, may be gasified to form hydrogen that may be used in the hydrogenation step of the present invention. Exemplary fermentation processes for forming acetic acid are disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 6,509,180, and U.S. Pub. Nos. 2008/0193989 and 2009/0281354, the entireties of which are incorporated herein by reference.

[0035] Examples of biomass include, but are not limited to, agricultural wastes, forest products, grasses, and other cellulosic material, timber harvesting residues, softwood chips, hardwood chips, tree branches, tree stumps, leaves, bark, sawdust, off-spec paper pulp, corn, corn stover, wheat straw, rice straw, sugarcane bagasse, switchgrass, miscanthus, animal manure, municipal garbage, municipal sewage, commercial waste, grape pumice, almond shells, pecan shells, coconut shells, coffee grounds, grass pellets, hay pellets, wood pellets, cardboard, paper, plastic, and cloth. Another biomass source is black liquor, which is an aqueous solution of lignin residues, hemicellulose, and inorganic chemicals.

[0036] U.S. Pat. No. RE 35,377, also incorporated herein by reference, provides a method for the production of methanol by converting carbonaceous materials such as oil, coal, natural gas and biomass materials. The process includes hydrogasification of solid and/or liquid carbonaceous materials to obtain a process gas which is steam pyrolyzed with additional natural gas to form syngas. The syngas is converted to methanol which may be carbonylated to acetic acid. The method likewise produces hydrogen which may be used in connection with this invention as noted above. U.S. Pat. No. 5,821,111, which discloses a process for converting waste biomass through gasification into synthesis gas, and U.S. Pat. No. 6,685,754, which discloses a method for the production of a hydrogen-containing gas composition, such as a syngas including hydrogen and carbon monoxide, are incorporated herein by reference in their entireties.

[0037] Acetic acid fed to the hydrogenation reactor may also comprise other carboxylic acids and anhydrides, as well as acetaldehyde and acetone. Preferably, a suitable acetic acid feed stream comprises one or more of the compounds selected from the group consisting of acetic acid, acetic anhydride, acetaldehyde, ethyl acetate, and mixtures thereof. These other compounds may also be hydrogenated in the processes of the present invention. In some embodiments, the presence of carboxylic acids, such as propanoic acid or its aldehyde, may be beneficial in producing propanol. Water may also be present in the acetic acid feed.

[0038] Alternatively, acetic acid in vapor form may be taken directly as crude product from the flash vessel of a methanol carbonylation unit of the class described in U.S. Pat. No. 6,657,078, the entirety of which is incorporated herein by reference. The crude vapor product, for example, may be fed directly to the ethanol synthesis reaction zones of the present invention without the need for condensing the acetic acid and light ends or removing water, saving overall processing costs.

[0039] The acetic acid may be vaporized at the reaction temperature, following which the vaporized acetic acid may be fed along with hydrogen in an undiluted state or diluted with a relatively inert carrier gas, such as nitrogen, argon, helium, carbon dioxide and the like. For reactions run in the vapor phase, the temperature should be controlled in the system such that it does not fall below the dew point of acetic acid. In one embodiment, the acetic acid may be vaporized at the boiling point of acetic acid at the particular pressure, and then the vaporized acetic acid may be further heated to the reactor inlet temperature. In another embodiment, the acetic acid is mixed with other gases before vaporizing, followed by heating the mixed vapors up to the reactor inlet temperature. Preferably, the acetic acid is transferred to the vapor state by passing hydrogen and/or recycle gas through the acetic acid at a temperature at or below 125°C, followed by heating of the combined gaseous stream to the reactor inlet temperature.

[0040] Some embodiments of the process of hydrogenating acetic acid to form ethanol may include a variety of configurations using a fixed bed reactor or a fluidized bed reactor. In many embodiments of the present invention, an “adiabatic” reactor can be used; that is, there is little or no need for internal plumbing through the reaction zone to add or remove heat. In other embodiments, a radial flow reactor or reactors may be employed, or a series of reactors may be employed with or without heat exchange, quenching, or introduction of additional feed material. Alternatively, a shell and tube reactor provided with a heat transfer medium may be used. In

many cases, the reaction zone may be housed in a single vessel or in a series of vessels with heat exchangers therebetween.

[0041] In preferred embodiments, the catalyst is employed in a fixed bed reactor, e.g., in the shape of a pipe or tube, where the reactants, typically in the vapor form, are passed over or through the catalyst. Other reactors, such as fluid or ebullient bed reactors, can be employed. In some instances, the hydrogenation catalysts may be used in conjunction with an inert material to regulate the pressure drop of the reactant stream through the catalyst bed and the contact time of the reactant compounds with the catalyst particles.

[0042] The hydrogenation reaction may be carried out in either the liquid phase or vapor phase. Preferably, the reaction is carried out in the vapor phase under the following conditions. The reaction temperature may range from 125°C to 350°C, e.g., from 200°C to 325°C, from 225°C to 300°C, or from 250°C to 300°C. The pressure may range from 10 kPa to 3000 kPa, e.g., from 50 kPa to 2300 kPa, or from 100 kPa to 2100 kPa. The reactants may be fed to the reactor at a gas hourly space velocity (GHSV) from 50 hr⁻¹ to 50,000 hr⁻¹, e.g., from 500 hr⁻¹ to 30,000 hr⁻¹, from 1000 hr⁻¹ to 10,000 hr⁻¹, or from 1000 hr⁻¹ to 6500 hr⁻¹.

[0043] Although the reaction consumes two moles of hydrogen per mole of acetic acid to produce one mole of ethanol, the actual molar ratio of hydrogen to acetic acid in the feed stream may vary from about 100:1 to 1:100, e.g., from 50:1 to 1:50, from 20:1 to 1:2, or from 18:1 to 2:1.

[0044] Contact or residence time can also vary widely, depending upon such variables as amount of acetic acid, catalyst, reactor, temperature, and pressure. Typical contact times range from a fraction of a second to more than several hours when a catalyst system other than a fixed bed is used, with preferred contact times, at least for vapor phase reactions, from 0.1 to 100 seconds.

[0045] The hydrogenation of acetic acid to form ethanol is preferably conducted in the presence of a hydrogenation catalyst. Exemplary catalysts are further described in U.S. Pat. Nos. 7,608,744 and 7,863,489, and U.S. Pub. Nos. 2010/0121114 and 2010/0197985, the entireties of which are incorporated herein by reference. In another embodiment, the catalyst comprises a Co/Mo/S catalyst of the type described in U.S. Pub. No. 2009/0069609, the entirety of which is incorporated herein by reference. In some embodiments the catalyst may be a bulk catalyst.

[0046] In one embodiment, the catalyst comprises a first metal selected from the group consisting of copper, iron, cobalt, nickel, ruthenium, rhodium, palladium, osmium, iridium, platinum, titanium, zinc, chromium, rhenium, molybdenum, and tungsten. Preferably, the first metal is selected from the group consisting of platinum, palladium, cobalt, nickel, and ruthenium.

[0047] As indicated above, in some embodiments, the catalyst further comprises a second metal, which typically would function as a promoter. If present, the second metal preferably is selected from the group consisting of copper, molybdenum, tin, chromium, iron, cobalt, vanadium, tungsten, palladium, platinum, lanthanum, cerium, manganese, ruthenium, rhenium, gold, and nickel. More preferably, the second metal is selected from the group consisting of copper, tin, cobalt, rhenium, and nickel.

[0048] In certain embodiments where the catalyst includes two or more metals, e.g., a first metal and a second metal, the first metal is present in the catalyst in an amount from 0.1 to 10 wt.%, e.g., from 0.1 to 5 wt.%, or from 0.1 to 3 wt.%. The second metal preferably is present in an amount from 0.1 to 20 wt.%, e.g., from 0.1 to 10 wt.%, or from 0.1 to 7.5 wt.%.

[0049] Preferred metal combinations for exemplary catalyst compositions include platinum/tin, platinum/ruthenium, platinum/rhenium, palladium/ruthenium, palladium/rhenium, cobalt/palladium, cobalt/platinum, cobalt/chromium, cobalt/ruthenium, cobalt/tin, silver/palladium, copper/palladium, copper/zinc, nickel/palladium, gold/palladium, ruthenium/rhenium, or ruthenium/iron.

[0050] The catalyst may also comprise a third metal selected from any of the metals listed above in connection with the first or second metal, so long as the third metal is different from the first and second metals. In preferred aspects, the third metal is selected from the group consisting of cobalt, palladium, ruthenium, copper, zinc, platinum, tin, and rhenium. When present, the total weight of the third metal preferably is from 0.05 to 20 wt.%, e.g., from 0.1 to 10 wt.%, or from 0.1 to 7.5 wt.%. In one embodiment, the catalyst may comprise platinum, tin and cobalt.

[0051] In addition to one or more metals, in some embodiments of the present invention the catalysts further comprise a support or a modified support. As used herein, the term “modified support” refers to a support that includes a support material and a support modifier, which adjusts the acidity of the support material. The total weight of the support or modified support, based on the total weight of the catalyst, preferably is from 75 to 99.9 wt.%, e.g., from 78 to 97

wt.%, or from 80 to 97.5 wt.%. Preferred supports include siliceous supports, such as silica, silica/alumina, a Group IIA silicate such as calcium metasilicate, pyrogenic silica, high purity silica, and mixtures thereof. Other supports may include, but are not limited to, iron oxide, alumina, titania, zirconia, magnesium oxide, carbon, graphite, high surface area graphitized carbon, activated carbons, and mixtures thereof.

[0052] The support may be a modified support and the support modifier is present in an amount from 0.1 to 50 wt.%, e.g., from 0.2 to 25 wt.%, from 1 to 20 wt.%, or from 3 to 15 wt.%, based on the total weight of the catalyst. In some embodiments, the support modifier may be an acidic modifier that increases the acidity of the catalyst. Suitable acidic support modifiers may be selected from the group consisting of: oxides of Group IVB metals, oxides of Group VB metals, oxides of Group VIB metals, oxides of Group VIIB metals, oxides of Group VIIIB metals, aluminum oxides, and mixtures thereof. Acidic support modifiers include those selected from the group consisting of TiO_2 , ZrO_2 , Nb_2O_5 , Ta_2O_5 , Al_2O_3 , B_2O_3 , P_2O_5 , Sb_2O_3 , WO_3 , MoO_3 , Fe_2O_3 , Cr_2O_3 , V_2O_5 , MnO_2 , CuO , Co_2O_3 , and Bi_2O_3 . Preferred support modifiers include oxides of tungsten, molybdenum, and vanadium.

[0053] In another embodiment, the support modifier may be a basic modifier that has a low volatility or no volatility. Such basic modifiers, for example, may be selected from the group consisting of: (i) alkaline earth metal oxides, (ii) alkali metal oxides, (iii) alkaline earth metal metasilicates, (iv) alkali metal metasilicates, (v) Group IIB metal oxides, (vi) Group IIB metal metasilicates, (vii) Group IIIB metal oxides, (viii) Group IIIB metal metasilicates, and mixtures thereof. The basic support modifier may be selected from the group consisting of oxides and metasilicates of any of sodium, potassium, magnesium, calcium, scandium, yttrium, and zinc, as well as mixtures of any of the foregoing. In one embodiment, the basic support modifier is a calcium silicate, such as calcium metasilicate (CaSiO_3). The calcium metasilicate may be crystalline or amorphous.

[0054] Catalysts on a modified support may include one or more metals from the group of platinum, palladium, cobalt, tin, or rhenium on a silica support modified by one or more modifiers from the group of calcium metasilicate, oxides of tungsten, molybdenum, and vanadium.

[0055] The catalyst compositions suitable for use with the present invention preferably are formed through metal impregnation of the modified support, although other processes such as

chemical vapor deposition may also be employed. Such impregnation techniques are described in U.S. Pat. Nos. 7,608,744 and 7,863,489 and U.S. Pub. No. 2010/0197485 referred to above, the entireties of which are incorporated herein by reference.

[0056] After the washing, drying and calcining of the catalyst is completed, the catalyst may be reduced in order to activate the catalyst. Reduction is carried out in the presence of a reducing gas, preferably hydrogen. The reducing gas is continuously passed over the catalyst at an initial ambient temperature that is increased up to 400°C. In one embodiment, the reduction is preferably carried out after the catalyst has been loaded into the reaction vessel where the hydrogenation will be carried out.

[0057] In particular, the hydrogenation of acetic acid may achieve favorable conversion of acetic acid and favorable selectivity and productivity to ethanol. For purposes of the present invention, the term “conversion” refers to the amount of acetic acid in the feed that is converted to a compound other than acetic acid. Conversion is expressed as a percentage based on acetic acid in the feed. The conversion may be at least 40%, e.g., at least 50%, at least 60%, at least 70% or at least 80%. Although catalysts that have high conversions are desirable, such as at least 80% or at least 90%, in some embodiments a low conversion may be acceptable at high selectivity for ethanol.

[0058] Selectivity is expressed as a mole percent based on converted acetic acid. It should be understood that each compound converted from acetic acid has an independent selectivity and that selectivity is independent from conversion. For example, if 60 mole % of the converted acetic acid is converted to ethanol, we refer to the ethanol selectivity as 60%. Preferably, the catalyst selectivity to ethanol is at least 60%, e.g., at least 70%, or at least 80%. Preferred embodiments of the hydrogenation process also have low selectivity to undesirable products, such as methane, ethane, and carbon dioxide. The selectivity to these undesirable products preferably is less than 4%, e.g., less than 2% or less than 1%.

[0059] The term “productivity,” as used herein, refers to the grams of a specified product, e.g., ethanol, formed during the hydrogenation based on the kilograms of catalyst used per hour. The productivity may range from 100 to 3,000 grams of ethanol per kilogram of catalyst per hour.

[0060] In various embodiments of the present invention, the crude ethanol stream produced by the hydrogenation process, before any subsequent processing, such as purification and separation, will typically comprise acetic acid, ethanol and water. Exemplary compositional

ranges for the crude ethanol stream are provided in Table 1, excluding hydrogen. The “others” identified in Table 1 may include, for example, esters, ethers, aldehydes, ketones, alkanes, and carbon dioxide.

TABLE 1
CRUDE ETHANOL STREAM COMPOSITIONS

Component	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)
Ethanol	5 to 72	15 to 72	15 to 70	25 to 65
Acetic Acid	0 to 90	0 to 50	0 to 35	0 to 15
Water	5 to 40	5 to 30	10 to 30	10 to 26
Ethyl Acetate	0 to 30	1 to 25	3 to 20	5 to 18
Acetaldehyde	0 to 10	0 to 3	0.1 to 3	0.2 to 2
Others	0.1 to 10	0.1 to 6	0.1 to 4	--

[0061] In one embodiment, the crude ethanol stream of Table 1 may have low concentrations of acetic acid with higher conversion, and the acetic acid concentration may range from 0.01 wt.% to 20 wt.%, e.g., 0.05 wt.% to 15 wt.%, from 0.1 wt.% to 10 wt.% or from 1 wt.% to 5 wt.%. In embodiments having lower amounts of acetic acid, the conversion of acetic acid is preferably greater than 75%, e.g., greater than 85% or greater than 90%. In addition, the selectivity to ethanol may also be preferably high, and is preferably greater than 75%, e.g., greater than 85% or greater than 90%.

[0062] Exemplary ethanol recovery systems in accordance with embodiments of the present invention are shown in FIGS. 1-2. Each hydrogenation system 100 provides a suitable hydrogenation reactor and a process for separating ethanol from the crude reaction mixture according to an embodiment of the invention. System 100 comprises reaction zone 101 and separation zone 102. Further modifications and additional components to reaction zone 101 and separation zone 102 are described below. In FIG. 1 there is shown an optional extractor 120 and an esterification unit 150. In FIG. 2, there is shown a secondary reactor 160 and secondary vaporizer 161 for converting a portion of the first residue to the vapor phase.

[0063] As shown in FIGS. 1 and 2, the feed to reactor 103 comprises fresh acetic acid. Hydrogen and acetic acid are fed to vaporizer 104 via lines 105 and 106, respectively, to create a vapor feed stream in line 107 that is directed to reactor 103. In one embodiment, lines 105 and 106 may be combined and jointly fed to the vaporizer 104. The temperature of the vapor feed

stream in line 107 is preferably from 100°C to 350°C, e.g., from 120°C to 310°C or from 150°C to 300°C. Any feed that is not vaporized is removed from vaporizer 104, via blowdown 108. In addition, although line 107 is shown as being directed to the top of reactor 103, line 107 may be directed to the side, upper portion, or bottom of reactor 103.

[0064] Reactor 103 contains the catalyst that is used in the hydrogenation of the carboxylic acid, preferably acetic acid. In one embodiment, one or more guard beds (not shown) may be used upstream of the reactor, optionally upstream of vaporizer 104, to protect the catalyst from poisons or undesirable impurities contained in the feed or return/recycle streams. Such guard beds may be employed in the vapor or liquid streams. Suitable guard bed materials may include, for example, carbon, silica, alumina, ceramic, or resins. In one aspect, the guard bed media is functionalized, e.g., silver functionalized, to trap particular species such as sulfur or halogens. During the hydrogenation process, a crude ethanol stream is withdrawn, preferably continuously, from reactor 103 via line 109.

[0065] The crude ethanol stream may be condensed and fed to a separator 110, which, in turn, forms a vapor stream 112 and a liquid stream 113. In some embodiments, separator 110 may comprise a flasher or a knockout pot. The separator 110 may operate at a temperature from 20°C to 350°C, e.g., from 30°C to 325°C or from 60°C to 250°C. The pressure of separator 110 may be from 100 kPa to 3000 kPa, e.g., from 125 kPa to 2500 kPa or from 150 kPa to 2200 kPa. Optionally, the crude ethanol stream in line 109 may pass through one or more membranes to separate hydrogen and/or other non-condensable gases.

[0066] Vapor stream 112 exiting separator 110 may comprise hydrogen and hydrocarbons, and may be purged and/or returned to reaction zone 101. As shown, vapor stream 112 is combined with the hydrogen feed 105 and co-fed to vaporizer 104. In some embodiments, the returned vapor stream 112 may be compressed before being combined with hydrogen feed 105.

[0067] Liquid stream 113 from separator 110 is withdrawn and directed as a feed composition to the side of first distillation column 115, also referred to as a “light ends column.” Liquid stream 113 may be heated from ambient temperature to a temperature of up to 70°C, e.g., up to 50°C, or up to 40°C. The additional energy required to pre-heat liquid stream 113 above 70°C does not achieve the desired energy efficiency in first column 115 with respect to reboiler duties. In another embodiment, liquid stream 113 is not separately preheated, but is withdrawn from

separator 110, and cooled if needed, at a temperature of less than 70°C, e.g., less than 50°C, or less than 40°C, and directly fed to first column 115.

[0068] In one embodiment, the contents of liquid stream 113 are substantially similar to the crude ethanol stream obtained from the reactor, except that the composition has been depleted of hydrogen, carbon dioxide, methane and/or ethane, which have been removed by separator 110. Accordingly, liquid stream 113 may also be referred to as a crude ethanol stream. Exemplary components of liquid stream 113 are provided in Table 2. It should be understood that liquid stream 113 may contain other components, not listed in Table 2.

TABLE 2
FEED COMPOSITION TO COLUMN 115
(Liquid Stream 113)

	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)
Ethanol	5 to 72	10 to 70	15 to 65
Acetic Acid	< 90	5 to 80	0 to 35
Water	5 to 40	5 to 30	10 to 26
Ethyl Acetate	< 30	1 to 25	3 to 20
Acetaldehyde	< 10	0.001 to 3	0.1 to 3
Acetal	< 5	0.01 to 5	0.01 to 3
Acetone	< 5	0.0005 to 0.05	0.001 to 0.03

[0069] The amounts indicated as less than (<) in the tables throughout the present specification are preferably not present and if present may be present in amounts greater than 0.0001 wt.%.

[0070] In one embodiment, the ethyl acetate concentration in liquid stream 113 may affect the first column reboiler duty and size. Decreasing ethyl acetate concentrations may allow for reduced reboiler duty and size. In one embodiment, to reduce the ethyl acetate concentration (a) the catalyst in reactor 103 may convert ethyl acetate in addition to acetic acid; (b) the catalyst may be less selective for ethyl acetate, and/or (c) the feed to reactor 103, including recycles, may contain less ethyl acetate.

[0071] In the embodiment shown in FIG. 1, liquid stream 113 is introduced in the upper part of first column 115, e.g., upper half or upper third. In addition to liquid stream 113, an optional extractive agent 116 and an ethyl acetate recycle stream 117 are also fed to first column. Depending on the ethyl acetate concentration of ethyl acetate recycle stream 117, this stream may be introduced above or near the feed point of the liquid stream 113. Depending on the

targeted ethyl acetate concentration in the distillate of first column 115, the feed point of ethyl acetate recycle stream 117 will vary. Due to the relatively high ethanol concentrations of ethyl acetate recycle stream 117, as shown in Table 6 below, from 70 to 90 wt.% ethanol, it is preferred that ethyl acetate recycle stream 117 be fed to first column 115 instead of reactor 103.

[0072] Liquid stream 113 and ethyl acetate recycle stream 117 collectively comprise the organic feed to first column 115. In one embodiment, the organic feed comprises from 1 to 25% of ethyl acetate recycle stream 117, e.g., from 1% to 15% or from 1% to 10%. This amount may vary depending on the production of reactor 103 and amount of ethyl acetate to be recycled.

[0073] In some embodiments, there may be optional extractive agent 116 that is preferably introduced above the liquid stream 113. Optional extractive agent 116 may be heated from ambient temperature to a temperature of up to 70°C, e.g., up to 50°C, or up to 40°C. In another embodiment, optional extractive agent 116 is not separately preheated, but is withdrawn from second column 130, and cooled, if necessary, to a temperature of less than 70°C, e.g., less than 50°C, or less than 40°C, and directly fed to first column 115. Optional extractive agent 116 preferably comprises water that has been retained within the system. As described herein, extractive agent 116 may be obtained from a portion of the second residue. Extractive agent 116 may be a dilute acid stream comprising up to 20 wt.% acetic acid, e.g., up to 10 wt.% acetic acid or up to 5 wt.% acetic acid. In one embodiment, the mass flow ratio of water in extractive agent 116 to the mass flow of the organic feed, which comprises liquid stream 113 and ethyl acetate recycle stream 117, may range from 0.05:1 to 2:1, e.g., from 0.07 to 0.9:1 or from 0.1:1 to 0.7:1. It is preferred that the mass flow of extractive agent 116 is less than the mass flow of the organic feed.

[0074] In one embodiment, first column 115 is a tray column having from 5 to 90 theoretical trays, e.g. from 10 to 60 theoretical trays or from 15 to 50 theoretical trays. The number of actual trays for each column may vary depending on the tray efficiency, which is typically from 0.5 to 0.7 depending on the type of tray. The trays may be sieve trays, fixed valve trays, movable valve trays, or any other suitable design known in the art. In other embodiments, a packed column having structured packing or random packing may be employed.

[0075] When first column 115 is operated under 50 kPa, the temperature of the residue exiting in line 118 preferably is from 20°C to 100°C, e.g., from 30°C to 90°C or from 40°C to 80°C. The base of column 115 may be maintained at a relatively low temperature by withdrawing a

residue stream comprising ethanol, ethyl acetate, water, and acetic acid, thereby providing an energy efficiency advantage. The temperature of the distillate exiting in line 119 from column 115 preferably at 50 kPa is from 10°C to 80°C, e.g., from 20°C to 70°C or from 30°C to 60°C. The pressure of first column 115 may range from 0.1 kPa to 510 kPa, e.g., from 1 kPa to 475 kPa or from 1 kPa to 375 kPa. In some embodiments, first column 115 may operate under a vacuum of less than 70 kPa, e.g., less than 50 kPa, or less than 20 kPa. Operating under a vacuum may decrease the reboiler duty and reflux ratio of first column 115. However, a decrease in operating pressure for first column 115 does not substantially affect column diameter.

[0076] In first column 115, a weight majority of the ethanol, water, acetic acid, are removed from the organic feed, including liquid stream 113 and ethyl acetate recycle stream 117, and are withdrawn, preferably continuously, as residue in line 118. This includes any water added as an extractive agent 116. Concentrating the ethanol in the residue reduces the amount of ethanol that is recycled to reactor 103 and in turn reduces the size of reactor 103. Preferably less than 10% of the ethanol from the organic feed, e.g., less than 5% or less than 1% of the ethanol, is returned to reactor 103 from first column 115. In addition, concentrating the ethanol also will concentrate the water and/or acetic acid in the residue. In one embodiment, at least 90% of the ethanol from the organic feed is withdrawn in the residue, and more preferably at least 95%. In addition, ethyl acetate may also be present in the first residue in line 118. The reboiler duty may decrease with an ethyl acetate concentration increase in the first residue in line 118.

[0077] First column 115 also forms a distillate, which is withdrawn in line 119, and which may be condensed and refluxed, for example, at a ratio from 30:1 to 1:30, e.g., from 10:1 to 1:10 or from 5:1 to 1:5. Higher mass flow ratios of water to organic feed may allow first column 115 to operate with a reduced reflux ratio.

[0078] First distillate in line 119 preferably comprises a weight majority of the acetaldehyde and ethyl acetate from liquid stream 113, as well as from ethyl acetate recycle stream 117. In one embodiment, the first distillate in line 119 comprises a concentration of ethyl acetate that is less than the ethyl acetate concentration for the azeotrope of ethyl acetate and water, and more preferably less than 75 wt.%.

[0079] In some embodiments, first distillate in stream 119 also comprises ethanol. Returning the first distillate comprising ethanol to the reactor may require an increase in reactor capacity to maintain the same level of ethanol efficiency. In one embodiment, it is preferred to return to the

reactor less than 10% of the ethanol from the crude ethanol stream, e.g., less than 5% or less than 1%. In terms of ranges, the amount of returned ethanol is from 0.01 to 10% of the ethanol in the crude ethanol stream, e.g. from 0.1 to 5% or from 0.2 to 1%. In one embodiment, to reduce the amount of ethanol returned, the ethanol may be recovered from the first distillate in line 119. To recover ethanol, first distillate in line 119 is fed, as is shown in FIG. 1, to an optional extractor 120. Extractor 120 comprises an extraction column 121 to recover ethanol and reduce the ethanol concentration recycled to reactor 103. Extraction column 120 may be a multi-stage extractor. In extraction column 121, the first distillate in line 119 is fed along with at least one extractant 122. In one embodiment, extractant 122 may be selected from the group consisting of benzene, propylene glycol, cyclohexane and mixtures thereof. Although water may be used, extractant 122 preferably does not form an azeotrope with ethanol. A suitable extractant 122 is preferably non-carcinogenic and non-hazardous. Preferably, the extractant extracts ethanol from the first distillate in extractant stream 124. The extractant may be recovered from stream 124 in recovery column 123 and returned via line 125. The ethanol stream in line 126 may be combined with ethanol product or returned to one of the distillation columns, such as first column 115. The raffinate 127 may be returned to reaction zone 101. Preferably, raffinate 127, which comprises acetaldehyde and ethyl acetate, is deficient in ethanol with respect to first distillate in line 119. In one embodiment, raffinate comprises less than 2 wt.% ethanol, e.g., less than 1 wt.% ethanol or less than 0.5 wt.% ethanol.

[0080] Exemplary components of the distillate and residue compositions for first column 115 are provided in Table 3 below. It should also be understood that the distillate and residue may also contain other components, not listed in Table 3. For convenience, the distillate and residue of the first column may also be referred to as the “first distillate” or “first residue.” The distillates or residues of the other columns may also be referred to with similar numeric modifiers (second, third, etc.) in order to distinguish them from one another, but such modifiers should not be construed as requiring any particular separation order.

TABLE 3
LIGHT ENDS COLUMN

	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)
<u>Distillate</u>			
Ethyl Acetate	10 to 85	15 to 80	20 to 75
Acetaldehyde	0.1 to 70	0.2 to 65	0.5 to 65
Acetal	< 3	0.01 to 2	0.05 to 1.5
Acetone	< 0.05	0.001 to 0.03	0.01 to 0.025
Ethanol	<25	0.001 to 20	0.01 to 15
Water	0.1 to 20	1 to 15	2 to 10
Acetic Acid	<2	<0.1	<0.05
<u>Residue</u>			
Acetic Acid	0.1 to 50	0.5 to 40	1 to 30
Water	5 to 40	5 to 35	10 to 25
Ethanol	10 to 75	15 to 70	20 to 65
Ethyl Acetate	0.005 to 30	0.03 to 25	0.08 to 1

[0081] In one embodiment of the present invention, first column 115 may be operated at a temperature where most of the water, ethanol, and acetic acid are removed into the residue stream and only a small amount of ethanol and water is collected in the distillate stream due to the formation of binary and tertiary azeotropes. The weight ratio of water in the residue in line 118 to water in the distillate in line 119 may be greater than 1:1, e.g., greater than 2:1. There may be more water in residue in line 118 when an optional extractive agent 116 is used. The weight ratio of ethanol in the residue to ethanol in the distillate may be greater than 1:1, e.g., greater than 2:1.

[0082] The amount of acetic acid in the first residue may vary depending primarily on the conversion in reactor 103. In one embodiment, when the conversion is high, e.g., greater than 90%, the amount of acetic acid in the first residue may be less than 10 wt.%, e.g., less than 5 wt.% or less than 2 wt.%. In other embodiments, when the conversion is lower, e.g., less than 90%, the amount of acetic acid in the first residue may be greater than 10 wt.%.

[0083] The first distillate in line 119 preferably is substantially free of acetic acid, e.g., comprising less than 1000 wppm, less than 500 wppm or less than 100 wppm acetic acid. The distillate may be purged from the system or recycled in whole or part to reactor 103. In some embodiments, when the distillate comprises ethyl acetate and acetaldehyde, the distillate may be further separated, e.g., in a distillation column (not shown), into an acetaldehyde stream and an

ethyl acetate stream. Either of these streams may be returned to reactor 103 or separated from system 100 as additional products. The ethyl acetate stream may also be hydrolyzed or reduced with hydrogen, via hydrogenolysis, to produce ethanol. When additional ethanol is produced, it is preferred that the additional ethanol is recovered and not directed to reactor 103.

[0084] Some species, such as acetals, may decompose in first column 115 so that very low amounts, or even no detectable amounts, of acetals remain in the distillate or residue.

[0085] In addition, an equilibrium reaction between acetic acid/ethanol and ethyl acetate may occur in the crude ethanol stream after exiting reactor 103 or first column 115. Without being bound by theory, ethyl acetate may be formed in the reboiler of first column 115. Depending on the concentration of acetic acid in the crude ethanol stream, this equilibrium may be driven toward formation of ethyl acetate. This reaction may be regulated through the residence time and/or temperature of the crude ethanol stream.

[0086] In one embodiment, due to the composition of first residue in line 118, the equilibrium may favor esterification to produce ethyl acetate. While the esterification, either in the liquid or vapor phase, may consume ethanol, the esterification may also reduce the amount of acetic acid that needs to be removed from the process. Ethyl acetate may be removed from first column 115 via esterification between first column 115 and second column 130 as shown in FIG. 2. The esterification reactor may be either a liquid or vapor phase reactor and may comprise an acidic catalyst. Acid-catalyzed esterification reactions may be used with some embodiments of the present invention. The catalyst should be thermally stable at reaction temperatures. Suitable catalysts may be solid acid catalysts comprising an ion exchange resin, zeolites, Lewis acid, metal oxides, inorganic salts and hydrates thereof, heteropoly acids, and salts thereof. Silica gel, aluminum oxide, and aluminum phosphate are also suitable catalysts. Acid catalysts include, but are not limited to, sulfuric acid, and tosic acid. In addition, Lewis acids may also be used as esterification catalysts, such as scandium(III) or lanthanide(III) triflates, hafnium(IV) or zirconium(IV) salts, and diarylammonium arenesulfonates. The catalyst may also include sulfonated (sulphonic acid) ion-exchange resins (e.g., gel-type and macroporous sulfonated styrene-divinyl benzene IERs), sulfonated polysiloxane resins, sulfonated perfluorinated (e.g., sulfonated poly-perfluoroethylene), or sulfonated zirconia.

[0087] To recover ethanol, first residue in line 118 may be further separated depending on the concentration of acetic acid and/or ethyl acetate. In most embodiments of the present invention,

residue in line 118 is further separated in a second column 130, also referred to as an “acid column.” Second column 130 yields a second residue in line 131 comprising acetic acid and water, and a second distillate in line 132 comprising ethanol and ethyl acetate. In one embodiment, a weight majority of the water and/or acetic acid fed to second column 130 is removed in the second residue in line 131, e.g., at least 60% of the water and/or acetic acid is removed in the second residue in line 131 or more preferably at least 80% of the water and/or acetic acid. An acid column may be desirable, for example, when the acetic acid concentration in the first residue is greater 50 wppm, e.g., greater than 0.1 wt.%, greater than 1 wt.%, e.g., greater than 5 wt.%.

[0088] In one embodiment, a portion of the first residue in line 118 may be preheated prior to being introduced into second column 130, as shown in FIG. 2. The preheating of the first residue in line 118 may be heat integrated with either the residue of the second column 130 or vapor overhead of second column 130. At least one portion of first residue in line 118 may pass through either a secondary reactor 160, which is preferably a vapor phase esterification reactor, or into a secondary vaporizer 161. Secondary reactor 160 may comprise both a vaporizer and a vapor phase esterification reactor that produces a stream in which at least a portion of the contents are in the vapor phase. Secondary vaporizer 161 also produces a stream in which at least a portion of the contents are in the vapor phase. The streams from secondary reactor 160 and secondary vaporizer 161 may be combined with a portion of the first residue that bypasses the preheating in line 162. The partial vapor feed in line 163 preferred has less than 30 mol.% of the contents in the vapor phase, e.g., less than 25 mol.% or less than 20 mol.%. In terms of ranges, from 1 to 30 mol.% is in the vapor phase, e.g., from 5 to 20 mol.%. Greater vapor phase contents result in increased energy consumption and a significant increase in the size of second column 130. It should be understood that the preheating of FIG. 2 may be combined with the features shown in FIG. 1.

[0089] Esterifying the acetic acid in first residue in line 118 increases the ethyl acetate concentration which leads to increases in the size of second column 130 as well increases in reboiler duty. Thus, the conversion of acetic acid may be controlled depending on the initial ethyl acetate concentration withdrawn from first column. To maintain an efficient separation the ethyl acetate concentration of the first residue in line 118 feed to second column is preferably less than 1000 wppm, e.g., less than 800 wppm or less than 600 wppm.

[0090] Second column 130 operates in a manner to concentrate the ethanol from first residue so that a majority of the ethanol is carried overhead. Thus, the residue of second column 130 may have a low ethanol concentration of less than 5 wt.%, e.g. less than 1 wt.% or less than 0.5 wt.%. Lower ethanol concentrations may be achieved without significant increases in reboiler duty or column size. Thus, in some embodiments, it is efficient to reduce the ethanol concentration in the residue to less than 50 wppm, or more preferably less than 25 wppm. As described herein, the residue of second column 130 may be treated and lower concentrations of ethanol allow the residue to be treated without generating further impurities.

[0091] In FIG. 1, the first residue in line 118 is introduced to second column 130 preferably in the top part of column 130, e.g., top half or top third. Feeding first residue in line 118 in a lower portion of second column 130 may unnecessarily increase the energy requirements of second column 130. Acid column 130 may be a tray column or packed column. In FIG. 1, second column 130 may be a tray column having from 10 to 110 theoretical trays, e.g. from 15 to 95 theoretical trays or from 20 to 75 theoretical trays. Additional trays may be used if necessary to further reduce the ethanol concentration in the residue. In one embodiment, the reboiler duty and column size may be reduced by increasing the number of trays.

[0092] Although the temperature and pressure of second column 130 may vary, when at atmospheric pressure the temperature of the second residue in line 131 preferably is from 95°C to 160°C, e.g., from 100°C to 150°C or from 110°C to 145°C. In one embodiment, first residue in line 118 is preheated to a temperature that is within 20°C of the temperature of second residue in line 131, e.g., within 15°C or within 10°C. The temperature of the second distillate exiting in line 132 from second column 130 preferably is from 50°C to 120°C, e.g., from 75°C to 118°C or from 80°C to 115°C. The temperature gradient may be sharper in the base of second column 130.

[0093] The pressure of second column 130 may range from 0.1 kPa to 510 kPa, e.g., from 1 kPa to 475 kPa or from 1 kPa to 375 kPa. In one embodiment, second column 130 operates above atmospheric pressure, e.g., above 170 kPa or above 375 kPa. Second column 130 may be constructed of a material such as 316L SS, Allot 2205 or Hastelloy C, depending on the operating pressure. The reboiler duty and column size for second column 130 remain relatively constant until the ethanol concentration in the second distillate in line 132 is greater than 90 wt.%.

[0094] In one optional embodiment, first column 115 is an extractive column that preferably uses water. The additional water is separated in second column 130. While using water as an extractive agent may reduce the reboiler duty of first column 115, when the mass flow ratio of water to organic feed is larger than 0.65:1, e.g., larger than 0.6:1 or larger than 0.54:1, the additional water will cause an increase in reboiler duty of second column 130 that offsets any benefit gained by first column 115.

[0095] Second column 130 also forms an overhead, which is withdrawn in line 133, and which may be condensed and refluxed, for example, at a ratio from 12:1 to 1:12, e.g., from 10:1 to 1:10 or from 8:1 to 1:8. The overhead in line 133 preferably comprises 85 to 92 wt.% ethanol, e.g., about 87 to 90 wt.% ethanol, with the remaining balance being water and ethyl acetate.

[0096] In one embodiment, water may be removed prior to recovering the ethanol product. In one embodiment, the overhead in line 133 may comprise less than 15 wt.% water, e.g., less than 10 wt.% water or less than 8 wt.% water. As shown in FIG. 1, overhead vapor in line 133 may be fed to water separator 135, which may be an adsorption unit, membrane, molecular sieves, extractive column distillation, or a combination thereof. In one embodiment, at least 50% of overhead vapor is fed to water separator 135, e.g., at least 75% or at least 90%. Optionally, some of overhead vapor in line 133 is condensed as second distillate 132 and optionally may be fed directly to third distillation column 140.

[0097] Water separator 135 in FIG. 1 may be a pressure swing adsorption (PSA) unit. For purposes of clarity, the details of the PSA unit are not shown in the figures. The PSA unit is optionally operated at a temperature from 30°C to 160°C, e.g., from 80°C to 140°C, and a pressure from 0.01 kPa to 550 kPa, e.g., from 1 kPa to 150 kPa. The PSA unit may comprise two to five beds. Water separator 135 may remove at least 95% of the water overhead vapor 133, and more preferably from 95% to 99.99% of the water from vapor overhead 133, into a water stream 134. All or a portion of water stream 134 may be returned to second column 130 in line 136, which may increase the reboiler duty and/or size of second column 130. Additionally or alternatively, all or a portion of water stream may be purged via line 137. The remaining portion of vapor overhead 133 exits the water separator 135 as ethanol mixture stream 138. In one embodiment, ethanol mixture stream 138 comprises more than 92 wt.% ethanol, e.g., more than 95 wt.% or more than 99 wt.%. In one embodiment a portion of water stream 137 may be fed to first column 115 as the extractive agent (not shown).

[0098] A portion of vapor overhead 133 may be condensed and refluxed to second column 130, as shown, for example, at a ratio from 12:1 to 1:12, e.g., from 10:1 to 1:10 or from 8:1 to 1:8. The second distillate in line 132 optionally may be mixed with ethanol mixture stream 138 and co-fed to product column 140. This may be necessary if additional water is needed to improve separation in product column 140. It is understood that reflux ratios may vary with the number of stages, feed locations, column efficiency and/or feed composition. Operating with a reflux ratio of greater than 3:1 may be less preferred because more energy may be required to operate second column 130.

[0099] Exemplary components for ethanol mixture stream 138 and residue compositions for second column 130 are provided in Table 4 below. It should be understood that the distillate and residue may also contain other components, not listed in Table 4. For example, in optional embodiments, when ethyl acetate is in the feed to reactor 103, second residue in line 131 exemplified in Table 4 may also comprise high boiling point components.

TABLE 4
ACID COLUMN

	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)
<u>Ethanol Mixture Stream</u>			
Ethanol	90 to 99.9	92 to 99	96 to 99
Ethyl Acetate	< 10	0.001 to 5	0.005 to 4
Acetaldehyde	< 10	0.001 to 5	0.005 to 4
Water	< 10	0.001 to 3	0.01 to 1
Acetal	< 2	0.001 to 1	0.005 to 0.5
<u>Second Residue</u>			
Acetic Acid	0.1 to 45	0.2 to 40	0.5 to 35
Water	45 to 100	55 to 99.8	65 to 99.5
Ethyl Acetate	< 0.1	0.0001 to 0.05	0.0001 to 0.01
Ethanol	< 5	0.002 to 1	0.005 to 0.5

[0100] The weight ratio of ethanol in ethanol mixture stream 138 to ethanol in the second residue in line 131 preferably is at least 35:1. Preferably, ethanol mixture stream 138 is substantially free of acetic acid and may contain, if any, trace amounts of acetic acid.

[0101] In one embodiment, ethyl acetate fed to second column 130 may concentrate in the vapor overhead and pass through with ethanol mixture stream 138. Thus, preferably no ethyl acetate is withdrawn in the second residue in line 131. Advantageously this allows most of the

ethyl acetate to be subsequently recovered without having to further process the second residue in line 131.

[0102] In optional embodiments, the feed to reactor 103 may comprise acetic acid and/or ethyl acetate. When ethyl acetate is used alone as a feed, the crude ethanol stream may comprise substantially no water and/or acetic acid. There may be high boiling point components, such as alcohols having more than 2 carbon atoms, e.g., n-propanol, isopropanol, n-butanol, 2-butanol, and mixtures thereof. High boiling point components refer to compounds having a boiling point that is greater than ethanol. The high boiling point components may be removed in second column 130 in the second residue in line 131 described herein.

[0103] As discussed above, according to the present invention, unreacted acetic acid in the second residue in line 131 (also referred to as the dilute acid stream) is directed to esterification unit 120. In some embodiments, the second residue in line 131 may comprise at least 85% of the acetic acid from crude ethanol stream 109, e.g., at least 90% and more preferably at least 99%. In terms of ranges, the dilute acid stream optionally comprises from 85% to 99.5% or from 90% to 99.99% of the unreacted acetic acid from the crude ethanol stream. In one embodiment, substantially all of the unreacted acetic acid is recovered in the second residue in line 131. By removing substantially all of the unreacted acetic acid from crude ethanol stream 109, the process, in some aspects, advantageously does not require further separation of acetic acid from the ethanol. In some embodiments, the dilute acid stream comprises from 0.1 to 55 wt.% acetic acid and from 45 to about 99 wt.% water.

[0104] In one embodiment, substantially all of the unreacted acetic acid is reacted out of second residue in line 131. According to FIG. 1, second residue in line 131 is co-fed to esterification unit 150 with alcohol stream 151 to produce an ester product stream 152 comprising one or more esters and bottoms 153 comprising water. In one embodiment, ester product stream 152 and/or bottoms 153 may be substantially free of acetic acid. Second residue in line 131 may be fed to esterification unit 150 at a temperature from 20 to 90°C, e.g., from 25 to 75°C. Preheating may be used as necessary. In some embodiments, alcohol stream 151 and second residue in line 131 are fed to the esterification unit in a counter-current manner to facilitate the production of a reaction product. In another embodiment, not shown, alcohol stream 151 may be added directly to second residue in line 131 prior to being introduced into

esterification unit 150. The alcohol in alcohol stream 151 may be any suitable alcohol, such as methanol, ethanol, propanol, butanol, or mixtures thereof. Preferably, the alcohol is methanol.

[0105] In some embodiments, esterification unit 150 comprises a reaction zone comprising a reactor, coupled to a separation zone comprising one or more distillation columns and/or stripping columns. Suitable reactors for use in the esterification include batch reactors, continuously-fed stirred-tank reactors, plug-flow reactors, reactive distillation towers, or a combination thereof. In some embodiments, an acid catalyst is fed to the reactor to facilitate the esterification of the acetic acid. Suitable acid catalysts for use in the present invention include, but are not limited to sulfuric acid, phosphoric acid, sulfonic acids, heteropolyacids, other mineral acids and a combination thereof.

[0106] The residence time of esterification unit 150 may impact acetic acid conversion. In some embodiments, for example, the residence time in esterification unit 150 is from 0.1 to 5 hours, e.g., from 0.2 to 3 hours, or less than 1 hour.

[0107] The distillation column for the esterification unit 150 may comprise from 5 to 70 theoretical trays, e.g., from 10 to 50 theoretical trays or from 15 to 30 theoretical trays. The reflux of ester product stream 152 may be from 10:1 to 1:10, e.g., from 5:1 to 1:5 or from 2:1 to 1:2.

[0108] The operating parameters of esterification unit 150 may be varied to achieve a desired composition in ester product stream 152. For example, in some embodiments, temperature, pressure, feed rates, and residence times can be varied to increase conversion of acetic acid to an ester, decrease the formation of impurities, achieve more efficient separation, reduce energy consumption, or combinations thereof.

[0109] In one embodiment, esterification unit 150 operates at a base temperature from 100°C to 150°C, e.g., from 100°C to 130°C, or from 100°C to 120°C. In terms of pressure, esterification unit 120 may be operated at atmospheric pressure, subatmospheric pressure, or superatmospheric pressure. For example, in some embodiments, esterification unit 150 operates at a pressure from 50 kPa to 500 kPa, e.g., from 50 kPa to 400 kPa, or from 50 kPa to 200 kPa.

[0110] In some embodiments, the feed rates of acetic acid and alcohol to the esterification unit 150 may be adjusted to control the molar ratio of acetic acid to alcohol being fed to the esterification unit 150. For example, in some embodiments, the molar ratio of acetic acid to

methanol fed to the esterification unit 150 is from 1:1 to 1:50, e.g., from 1:2 to 1:35, or from 1:5 to 1:20.

[0111] The processes of the present invention preferably provide for a high conversion of acetic acid to ester(s). In one embodiment, at least 60%, e.g., at least 75%, at least 90% or at least 95% of the acetic acid in the second residue in line 131 is converted to an ester. Lower conversion of acetic acid may be tolerated if the acetic acid concentration in second residue in line 132 is relatively low.

[0112] The ester product stream 152 exiting the esterification unit 150 preferably comprises at least one ester. Exemplary compositions when using methanol as the alcohol stream 151 from the esterification unit 150 are provided in Table 5, below. It should also be understood that these compositions may also contain other components, not listed in Table 5. Lower amounts of the ester may be possible when higher concentrations of the alcohols are fed to the reactor relative to the acetic acid to be reacted. When excess alcohol is reacted with the acetic acid from the second residue in line 131, some alcohol also may be present in the ester product stream 152.

TABLE 5
ESTERIFICATION UNIT 150

	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)
<u>Ester Product Stream</u>			
Methyl Acetate	1 to 90	5 to 85	to 90
Methanol	40 to 99.9	45 to 95	50 to 90
Water	< 1	0.001 to 0.5	0.001 to 0.1
Acetic Acid	< 0.1	< 0.5	nd
Ether	< 1	0.001 to 0.5	0.001 to 0.1
<u>Bottoms</u>			
Water	90 to 99.9	92 to 99.9	95 to 99.9
Acetic Acid	< 5	0.001 to 3	0.01 to 1
Methanol	< 1	< 0.001	nd
Methyl Acetate	< 1	< 0.05	0.0001 to 0.005

[0113] Some impurities, such as dimethyl ether may form over the course of the reaction in esterification unit 150. These impurities may be present in very low amounts, or even no detectable amounts, in the ester product stream 152. In some embodiments, the ester product stream 152 comprises less than 1000 wppm dimethyl ether, e.g., less than 750 wppm, or less than 500 wppm.

[0114] In some embodiments, esterification unit 150 comprises a reactive distillation column. Reactive distillation column comprises an ion exchange resin bed, an acidic catalyst, or combinations thereof. Non-limiting examples of ion exchange resins suitable for use in the present invention include macroporous strong-acid cation exchange resins such as those from the Amberlyst[®] series distributed by Rohm and Haas. Additional ion exchange resins suitable for use in the present invention are disclosed in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,615,806, 5,139,981, and 7,588,690, the disclosures of which are incorporated by reference in their entireties. In other embodiments, reactive distillation column comprises an acid selected from the group consisting of sulfuric acid, phosphoric acid, sulfonic acids, heteropolyacids, other mineral acids and a combination thereof. In other embodiments, acid catalysts include zeolites and supports treated with mineral acids and heteropolyacids. When an acid catalyst is used, e.g., sulfuric acid, the acid catalyst is fed to the reactive distillation column.

[0115] In some embodiments, second residue in line 131 is optionally fed to a guard bed (not shown) and then fed to esterification unit 150. In this aspect, the guard bed comprises an ion exchange resin, such as those disclosed above. While not being bound to any particular theory, the guard bed removes one or more corrosive metals present in the second residue in line 131, thereby minimizing the deactivation of any ion exchange resin catalytic sites in the ion exchange resin present in esterification unit 150.

[0116] Bottoms 153 comprising water and may be substantially free of acetic acid. In one embodiment, a portion of bottoms 153 in optional line 154 may be directed to first column 115 as an optional extractive agent. In other embodiments, bottoms 153 may be used to hydrolyze a stream comprising ethyl acetate or diethyl acetal. Bottoms 153 may also be neutralized and/or diluted before being disposed of to a waste water treatment facility. The organic content, e.g., acetic acid content, of bottoms 153 beneficially may be suitable to feed microorganisms used in a waste water treatment facility.

[0117] As described above, ester product stream 152 may be further processed and/or refined. In one embodiment, a portion of ester product stream 152 is fed to a carbonylation process along with carbon monoxide to produce acetic acid. Suitable carbonylation processes are described above. This allows an indirect recycle of the unreacted acetic acid in the hydrogenation process through the carbonylation process and back to the hydrogenation process.

[0118] In an optional embodiment, ester product stream 152 may be reduced with hydrogen to form ethanol via hydrogenolysis. The resulting ethanol may be removed as a separate product or recycled to the process, such as to first column 115, second column 130, or esterification unit 150.

[0119] In one embodiment, due to the presence of ethyl acetate in ethanol mixture stream 138, an additional third column 140 may be used. A third column 140, referred to as a “light ends” column, is used for removing ethyl acetate from ethanol mixture stream 138 and producing an ethanol product in the third residue in line 141. Product column 140 may be a tray column or packed column. In FIG. 1, third column 140 may be a tray column having from 5 to 90 theoretical trays, e.g. from 10 to 60 theoretical trays or from 15 to 50 theoretical trays.

[0120] The feed location of ethanol mixture stream 138 may vary depending on ethyl acetate concentration and it is preferred to feed ethanol mixture stream 138 to the upper portion of third column 140. Higher concentrations of ethyl acetate may be fed at a higher location in third column 140. The feed location should avoid the very top trays, near the reflux, to avoid excess reboiler duty requirements for the column and an increase in column size. For example, in a column having 45 actual trays, the feed location should be between 10 to 15 trays from the top. Feeding at a point above this may increase the reboiler duty and size of product column 140.

[0121] Ethanol mixture stream 138 may be fed to third column 140 at a temperature of up to 70°C, e.g., up to 50°C, or up to 40°C. In some embodiments it is not necessary to further preheat ethanol mixture stream 138.

[0122] Ethyl acetate may be concentrated in the third distillate in line 142. Due to the relatively lower amounts of ethyl acetate fed to third column 140, third distillate in line 142 also comprises substantial amounts of ethanol. To recover the ethanol, third distillate in line 142 may be fed to first column as the ethyl acetate recycle stream 117. Because this increases the demands on the first and second columns, it is preferred that the concentration of ethanol in third distillate in line 142 be from 70 to 90 wt.%, e.g., from 72 to 88 wt.%, or from 75 to 85 wt.%.

[0123] In other embodiments, a portion of third distillate in line 142 may be purged from the system in line 143 as a separate product, such as an ethyl acetate solvent.

[0124] In some embodiments to recover the ethanol without sending third distillate in line 142 back to first column 115, the ethanol may be recovered using an extractive column 145 as shown in FIG. 4. In other embodiments, a portion of third distillate in line 142 may be purged from the

system in line 143 as a separate product, such as an ethyl acetate solvent. In addition, ethanol may be recovered from a portion of the third distillate in line 142 using an extractant, such as benzene, propylene glycol, and cyclohexane, such that the raffinate comprises less ethanol to recycle.

[0125] In an optional embodiment, the third residue may be further processed to recover ethanol with a desired amount of water, for example, using a further distillation column, adsorption unit, membrane or combination thereof, may be used to further remove water from third residue in line 141 as necessary. In most embodiments, the water is removed prior to third column 140 using water separator 135 and thus further drying of the ethanol is not required.

[0126] Third column 140 is preferably a tray column as described above and preferably operates at atmospheric pressure. The temperature of the third residue in line 141 exiting from third column 140 preferably is from 65°C to 110°C, e.g., from 70°C to 100°C or from 75°C to 80°C. The temperature of the third distillate in line 142 exiting from third column 140 preferably is from 30°C to 70°C, e.g., from 40°C to 65°C or from 50°C to 65°C.

[0127] The pressure of third column 140 may range from 0.1 kPa to 510 kPa, e.g., from 1 kPa to 475 kPa or from 1 kPa to 375 kPa. In some embodiments, third column 140 may operate under a vacuum of less than 70 kPa, e.g., less than 50 kPa, or less than 20 kPa. Decreases in operating pressure substantially decrease column diameter and reboiler duty for third column 140.

[0128] Exemplary components for ethanol mixture stream and residue compositions for third column 140 are provided in Table 6 below. It should be understood that the distillate and residue may also contain other components, not listed in Table 6.

TABLE 6
PRODUCT COLUMN

	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)
<u>Third Distillate</u>			
Ethanol	70 to 99	72 to 90	75 to 85
Ethyl Acetate	0.5 to 30	1 to 25	1 to 15
Acetaldehyde	< 15	0.001 to 10	0.1 to 5
Water	< 10	0.001 to 2	0.01 to 1
Acetal	< 2	0.001 to 1	0.01 to 0.5
<u>Third Residue</u>			
Ethanol	80 to 99.5	85 to 97	90 to 95
Water	< 8	0.001 to 3	0.01 to 1
Ethyl Acetate	< 1.5	0.0001 to 1	0.001 to 0.5
Acetic Acid	< 0.5	< 0.01	0.0001 to 0.01

[0129] When first residue in line 118 comprise low amounts of acetic acid and/or there is no esterification of first residue, such that the ethyl acetate concentration is less than 50 wppm, third column 140 may be optional. Thus, ethanol mixture stream 138 from the water separator 135 may be the ethanol product and there is no ethyl acetate recycle stream.

[0130] Depending on the amount of water and acetic acid contained in the second residue in line 131 may be treated in one or more of the following processes. One process involving an esterification unit 150 is shown in FIG. 1. A suitable weak acid recovery system is described in US Pub. No. 2012/0010446, the entire contents and disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference. When the residue comprises a majority of acetic acid, e.g., greater than 70 wt.%, the residue may be recycled to the reactor without any separation of the water. In one embodiment, the residue may be separated into an acetic acid stream and a water stream when the residue comprises a majority of acetic acid, e.g., greater than 50 wt.%. Acetic acid may also be recovered in some embodiments from first residue having a lower acetic acid concentration. The residue may be separated into the acetic acid and water streams by a distillation column or one or more membranes. If a membrane or an array of membranes is employed to separate the acetic acid from the water, the membrane or array of membranes may be selected from any suitable acid resistant membrane that is capable of removing a permeate water stream. The resulting acetic acid stream optionally is returned to reactor 103. The resulting water stream may be used as an extractive agent or to hydrolyze an ester-containing stream in a hydrolysis unit.

[0131] In other embodiments, for example where second residue in line 131 comprises less than 50 wt.% acetic acid, possible options include one or more of: (i) returning a portion of the residue to reactor 103, (ii) neutralizing the acetic acid, (iii) reacting the acetic acid with an alcohol, or (iv) disposing of the residue in a waste water treatment facility. It also may be possible to separate a residue comprising less than 50 wt.% acetic acid using a weak acid recovery distillation column to which a solvent (optionally acting as an azeotroping agent) may be added. Exemplary solvents that may be suitable for this purpose include ethyl acetate, propyl acetate, isopropyl acetate, butyl acetate, vinyl acetate, diisopropyl ether, carbon disulfide, tetrahydrofuran, isopropanol, ethanol, and C₃-C₁₂ alkanes. When neutralizing the acetic acid, it is preferred that the residue in line 131 comprises less than 10 wt.% acetic acid. Acetic acid may be neutralized with any suitable alkali or alkaline earth metal base, such as sodium hydroxide or potassium hydroxide. When reacting acetic acid with an alcohol, it is preferred that the residue comprises less than 50 wt.% acetic acid. The alcohol may be any suitable alcohol, such as methanol, ethanol, propanol, butanol, or mixtures thereof. The reaction forms an ester that may be integrated with other systems, such as carbonylation production or an ester production process. Preferably, the alcohol comprises ethanol and the resulting ester comprises ethyl acetate. Optionally, the resulting ester may be fed to the hydrogenation reactor.

[0132] In some embodiments, when the residue in line 131 comprises very minor amounts of acetic acid, e.g., less than 5 wt.% or less than 1 wt.%, the residue may be neutralized and/or diluted before being disposed of to a waste water treatment facility. The organic content, e.g., acetic acid content, of the residue beneficially may be suitable to feed microorganisms used in a waste water treatment facility.

[0133] The associated condensers and liquid separation vessels that may be employed with each of the distillation columns may be of any conventional design and are simplified in the figures. Heat may be supplied to the base of each column or to a circulating bottom stream through a heat exchanger or reboiler. Other types of reboilers, such as internal reboilers, may also be used. The heat that is provided to the reboilers may be derived from any heat generated during the process that is integrated with the reboilers or from an external source such as another heat generating chemical process or a boiler. Although one reactor and one flasher are shown in the figures, additional reactors, flashers, condensers, heating elements, and other components may be used in various embodiments of the present invention. As will be recognized by those

skilled in the art, various condensers, pumps, compressors, reboilers, drums, valves, connectors, separation vessels, etc., normally employed in carrying out chemical processes may also be combined and employed in the processes of the present invention.

[0134] The temperatures and pressures employed in the columns may vary. Temperatures within the various zones will normally range between the boiling points of the composition removed as the distillate and the composition removed as the residue. As will be recognized by those skilled in the art, the temperature at a given location in an operating distillation column is dependent on the composition of the material at that location and the pressure of column. In addition, feed rates may vary depending on the size of the production process and, if described, may be generically referred to in terms of feed weight ratios.

[0135] The ethanol product produced by the process of the present invention may be an industrial grade ethanol or fuel grade ethanol. Exemplary finished ethanol compositional ranges are provided below in Table 7.

TABLE 7
FINISHED ETHANOL COMPOSITIONS

Component	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)	Conc. (wt.%)
Ethanol	85 to 99.9	90 to 99.5	92 to 99.5
Water	< 8	0.1 to 3	0.1 to 1
Acetic Acid	< 1	< 0.1	< 0.01
Ethyl Acetate	< 2	< 0.5	< 0.05
Acetal	< 0.05	< 0.01	< 0.005
Acetone	< 0.05	< 0.01	< 0.005
Isopropanol	< 0.5	< 0.1	< 0.05
n-propanol	< 0.5	< 0.1	< 0.05

[0136] The finished ethanol composition of the present invention preferably contains very low amounts, e.g., less than 0.5 wt.%, of other alcohols, such as methanol, butanol, isobutanol, isoamyl alcohol and other C₄-C₂₀ alcohols. In one embodiment, the amount of isopropanol in the finished ethanol composition is from 80 to 1,000 wppm, e.g., from 95 to 1,000 wppm, from 100 to 700 wppm, or from 150 to 500 wppm. In one embodiment, the finished ethanol composition is substantially free of acetaldehyde, optionally comprising less than 8 wppm acetaldehyde, e.g., less than 5 wppm or less than 1 wppm.

[0137] The finished ethanol composition produced by the embodiments of the present invention may be used in a variety of applications including applications as fuels, solvents, chemical feedstocks, pharmaceutical products, cleansers, sanitizers, hydrogen transport or consumption. In fuel applications, the finished ethanol composition may be blended with gasoline for motor vehicles such as automobiles, boats and small piston engine aircraft. In non-fuel applications, the finished ethanol composition may be used as a solvent for toiletry and cosmetic preparations, detergents, disinfectants, coatings, inks, and pharmaceuticals. The finished ethanol composition may also be used as a processing solvent in manufacturing processes for medicinal products, food preparations, dyes, photochemicals and latex processing.

[0138] The finished ethanol composition may also be used as a chemical feedstock to make other chemicals such as vinegar, ethyl acrylate, ethyl acetate, ethylene, glycol ethers, ethylamines, aldehydes, and higher alcohols, especially butanol. In the production of ethyl acetate, the finished ethanol composition may be esterified with acetic acid. In another application, the finished ethanol composition may be dehydrated to produce ethylene.

[0139] While the invention has been described in detail, modifications within the spirit and scope of the invention will be readily apparent to those of skill in the art. In addition, it should be understood that aspects of the invention and portions of various embodiments and various features recited herein and/or in the appended claims may be combined or interchanged either in whole or in part. In the foregoing descriptions of the various embodiments, those embodiments which refer to another embodiment may be appropriately combined with one or more other embodiments, as will be appreciated by one of skill in the art. Furthermore, those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that the foregoing description is by way of example only, and is not intended to limit the invention.

We claim:

1. A process for producing ethanol comprising:
hydrogenating acetic acid and/or an ester thereof in a reactor in the presence of a catalyst to form a crude ethanol stream;
separating a portion of the crude ethanol stream in a first distillation column to yield a first distillate comprising acetaldehyde, ethyl acetate and ethanol, and a first residue comprising ethanol, acetic acid and ethyl acetate;
separating a portion of the first residue in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and a second distillate comprising ethanol and ethyl acetate; and
separating at least a portion of the second distillate in a third distillation column to yield a third distillate comprising ethyl acetate and a third residue comprising ethanol,
wherein the first distillate is returned to the reactor and less than 10% of the ethanol from the crude ethanol stream is returned to the reactor.
2. The process of claim 1, wherein less than 5% of the ethanol from the crude ethanol stream is returned to the reactor.
3. The process of claim 1, wherein from 0.1 to 10% of the ethanol from the crude ethanol stream is returned to the reactor.
4. The process of claim 1, wherein at least 90% of the ethanol in the crude ethanol stream is withdrawn into the first residue.
5. The process of claim 1, wherein the third distillate comprises from 70 to 99 wt.% ethanol.
6. The process of claim 1, wherein the third distillate is introduced to the first column.
7. The process of claim 1, wherein the first distillate is further separated to yield an ethanol stream and a raffinate stream comprising ethyl acetate.

8. The process of claim 7, wherein the raffinate stream comprises less than 2 wt.% ethanol.
9. The process of claim 7, wherein at least a portion of the raffinate stream is returned to the reactor.
10. The process of claim 7, wherein at least a portion of the ethanol stream is combined with the third residue.
11. The process of claim 7, wherein at least a portion of the ethanol stream is fed to the third distillation column.
12. The process of claim 1, wherein the ethanol has a $^{14}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ratio of the acetic acid from 0.5 to 1 of the $^{14}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ratio for living organisms.
13. The process of claim 1, wherein a total diameter for the first distillation column, the second distillation column and the third distillation column is from 5 to 40 meters and further wherein a ratio of total column diameter for the first distillation column, the second distillation column and the third distillation column to tons of ethanol produced per hour is from 1:2 to 1:30.
14. A process for producing ethanol comprising:
 - hydrogenating acetic acid and/or an ester thereof in a reactor in the presence of a catalyst to form a crude ethanol stream;
 - separating a portion of the crude ethanol stream in a first distillation column to yield a first distillate comprising acetaldehyde and ethyl acetate, and a first residue comprising ethanol, acetic acid and water;
 - converting a portion of the first residue into a partial vapor feed having less than 30 mol.% of the contents in the vapor phase;
 - separating a portion of the partial vapor feed in a second distillation column to yield a second residue comprising acetic acid and a second distillate comprising ethanol; and

recovering ethanol from the second distillate.

15. The process of claim 14, wherein a portion of the first residue is fed to a secondary reactor to convert at least some of the contents into the vapor phase.
16. The process of claim 15, wherein the secondary reactor is a vapor phase esterification reactor.
17. The process of claim 14, wherein a portion of the first residue is fed to a secondary vaporizer to convert at least some of the contents into the vapor phase.
18. The process of claim 14, wherein the partial vapor feed has less than 25 mol.% of the contents in the vapor phase.
19. The process of claim 14, wherein the partial vapor feed has from 0.1 to 30 mol.% of the contents in the vapor phase.
20. The process of claim 14, further comprising removing water from at least a portion of the second distillate using an adsorption unit, membrane, extractive column distillation, molecular sieve, or a combination thereof to yield an ethanol product stream having a lower water content than the at least a portion of the second distillate.
21. The process of claim 14, further comprising separating at least a portion of the second distillate in a third distillation column to yield a third distillate comprising ethyl acetate and a third residue comprising ethanol.
22. The process of claim 14, wherein the first distillate further comprises ethanol, the first distillate is returned to the reactor, and wherein less than 10% of the ethanol from the crude ethanol stream is returned to the reactor.

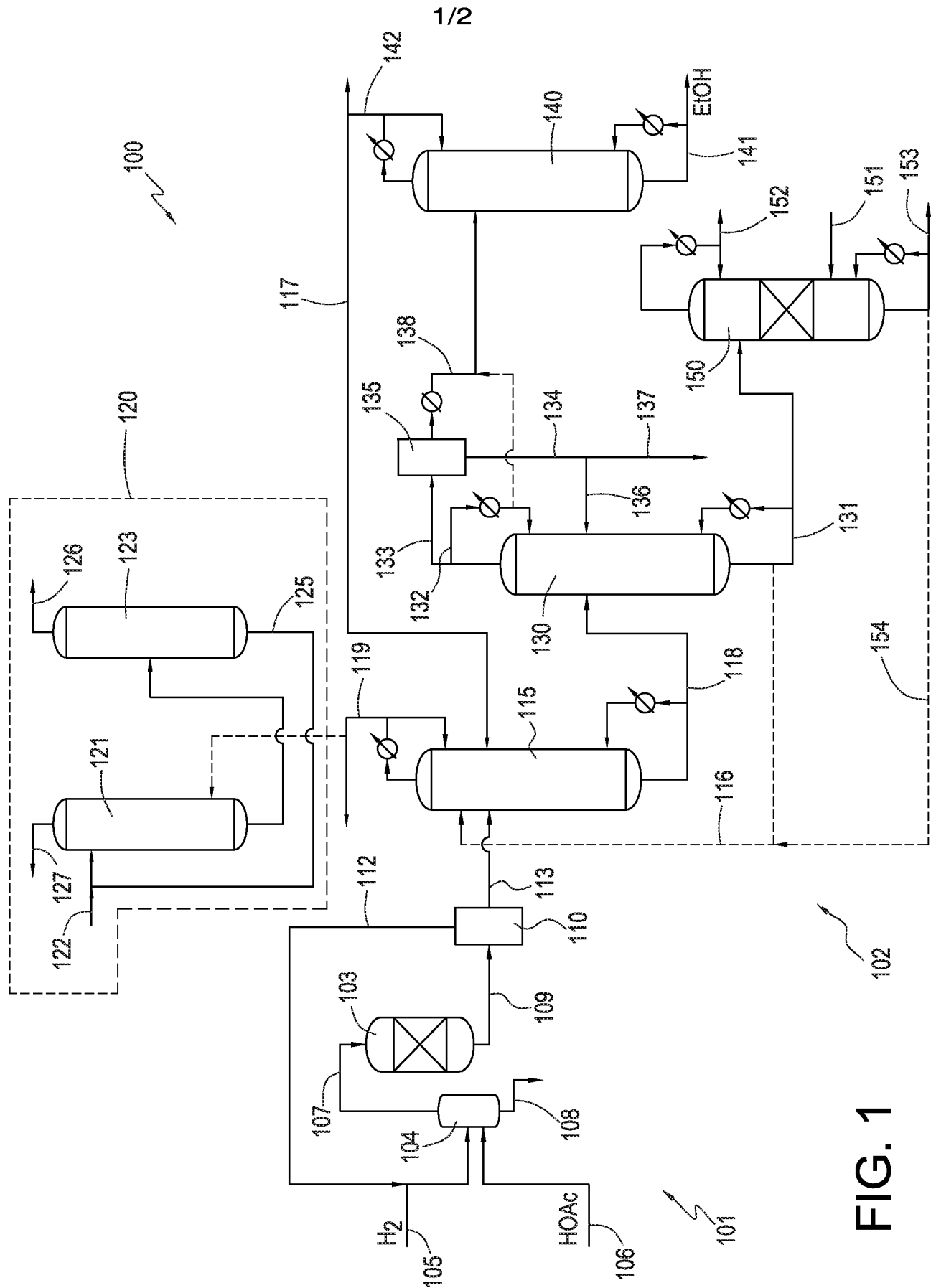


FIG. 1

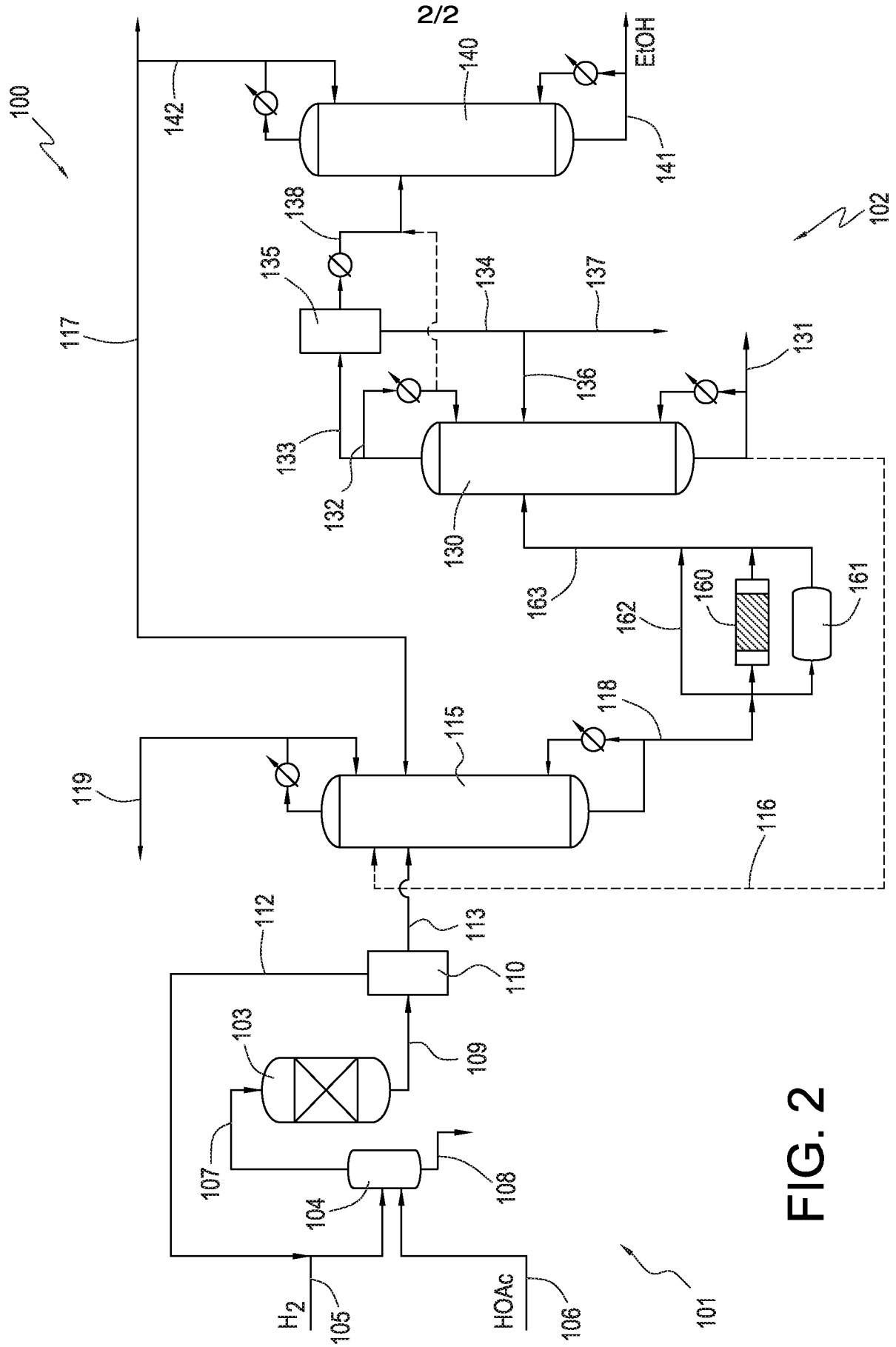


FIG. 2