SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR SERVING FOOD

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ABSTRACT
Systems and methods for serving food, which employ stackable containers. The system includes a first container, a second container, and a support structure having top and bottom tiers for receiving the first and second containers, respectively. The first container features two or more compartments into which food may be placed. The second container also features two or more compartments, and both the second container and its compartments can be complementary in size and shape to the first container and its compartments. The second container further includes a means for heating and a means for cooling so that both hot and cold food items may be simultaneously served during a meal. The distance between the first container and the second container when seated on the support structure is such that food items in the first container can be effectively cooled or heated as desired by the second container.
SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR SERVING FOOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims priority from U.S. patent application Ser. No. 61/159,149, filed on Mar. 11, 2009, which is incorporated herein in its entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The invention relates to systems and methods for serving food. More particularly, the invention relates to a serving container having compartments that can be used to simultaneously hold both hot and cold food items for service at a meal.

BACKGROUND

[0003] Traditionally, food items prepared for a meal are served in multiple serving dishes and platters. For example, the main entree, usually a meat or fish, is served in a large platter. Side items, such as vegetables, salads and fruits, are served in other separate serving bowls. The numerous serving bowls and platters required to serve a single meal in a household or at any dinner event require a significant amount of space on a table. The area required on a table to support all of these bowls and platters reduces the amount of table space available for other items such as, for example, cutlery, table napkins and linen, glasses and other beverage container, or flower arrangements. Conventional serving dishes and platters also require a significant amount of storage space due to their size and number needed to serve a main entree with multiple side items.

[0004] Another disadvantage of traditional serving platters and bowls is their inability to maintain the food items served in them at a constant recommended or desired temperature during the course of the meal. To maintain multiple serving platters and dishes at different, or even a single temperature (other than room temperature) requires the use of numerous hot plates, ice bath containers, or other heating or cooling devices. These heating and cooling devices require additional space, are often unattractive, may require the use of serving containers constructed from different materials having varying external appearances, and may detract from the theme of the meal or occasion for hosting the meal. Often, some food items are left inside cookware placed atop a stove, inside an oven, or inside a refrigerator, which makes the food inaccessible and is less aesthetically pleasing than seeing all food items presented and served in one defined area such as on a single tabletop.

[0005] A further disadvantage of traditional serving platters and bowls is the time and, in the case of a dishwasher, space required to effectively clean several large serving dishes. Numerous large serving dishes and platters fill an excessive amount of space within a dishwasher leaving little additional space for loading dinnerware and other items to be washed.

[0006] Still a further disadvantage of traditional serving dishes is the need, in some instances, to use pot holders, liners, or other insulated or solid materials to prevent heat or condensation moisture damage to a surface on which the serving dish is placed such as, for example, a wooden tabletop.

[0007] Yet a further disadvantage of traditional serving dishes is the difficulty sometimes experienced in gathering a sufficient number of matching dishes in which to serve multiple courses or food items during a meal so that the serveware theme, design, and decor is consistent.

[0008] A need exists for a compartmentalized serving container that can easily and effectively hold a main entree and at least one side item of food to be served at a meal. Moreover, a need exists for the compartmentalized serving container to be capable of maintaining food items contained therein at a constant temperature selected by a user. A need also exists for the compartmentalized serving container to be easily cleaned and stored.

SUMMARY

[0009] The invention described herein relates to systems and methods for serving food items during a meal. One embodiment of the system features a first container, a second container, and a support structure such as, for example, a rack. The rack may include a top tier for receiving and supporting the first container and a bottom tier for receiving and supporting the second container so that the first container is stacked on the rack immediately above the second container. Both the first and second containers will each feature at least two compartments. The compartments of each container are formed by walls, which may include an insulator. The second container and its compartments are complementary in shape and size to the first container and its compartments. When disposed on the bottom tier of the rack, the second container and its compartments can be vertically aligned with the compartmentally shaped first container and its compartments. Separate and discreet means for heating and means for cooling may be positioned in separate compartments of the second container as necessary to heat or cool the food items contained within the aligned compartments of the first container situated immediately above the second container. In another embodiment of the invention, the means for heating and means for cooling may be embedded or otherwise incorporated as a combined, unitary component of the second container.

[0010] In one embodiment, the compartments of the first container can be hinged so that the compartments may be collapsed or folded into one of the compartments, which is a main compartment that can be used for serving a main entree (e.g., a meat) or other large food item. In the collapsed configuration, the first container may be easily stored and may be more easily loaded into a dishwasher or sink for washing. In the open configuration of the first container, a method of the invention may allow the serving of all or most food items at a meal in a single compartmentalized container. The second container may be similarly constructed to include one or more hinges that permit the second container to be manipulated into an open configuration for serving food or a closed configuration for storage. The first and second containers may also be stored in the open configuration if economizing the usage of space is unnecessary, and they may be washed in either the open or closed configuration as desired by the user.

[0011] An advantage of the compartmentalized serving system is that numerous food items may be served in a single container at a meal.

[0012] Another advantage of the serving system is that the food items being served may be maintained at a constant, controlled temperature.
[0013] Yet another advantage of the serving system is that the serving system can be designed in virtually any shape so that the presentation of the food items being served within the serving system is aesthetically pleasing. The shape of the serving system used may also be matched to a theme of the meal or occasion for the meal such as during a holiday family gathering. Serving all food items in the serving system eliminates the need for obtaining and using multiple matching serving containers.

[0014] Still another advantage of the serving system is the low expense and relative ease of construction.

[0015] Still another advantage of the serving system is the ability to fold into a collapsed configuration for easy and compact storage or washing.

[0016] Still another advantage of the serving system is the ability to heat some food items while simultaneously cooling other food items.

[0017] Still another advantage of the serving system is that multiple food items can be served in a single location without the need for stoves, ovens, refrigerators, hot plates, or other heating or cooling devices.

[0018] Still another advantage of the serving system is the elimination of the need to use pot holders or other insulated liners to protect a surface from heat damage by the serving container.

[0019] Still another advantage of the serving system is the elimination of the need to use liners to capture condensation to protect a surface from damage by moisture that forms when hot or cold food containers form condensation that contacts the surface, e.g., a wooden tabletop.

[0020] Accordingly, the invention features a system for serving food. The system features a first container having at least one wall, at least one bottom, and at least two compartments. The system also features a support structure having a top tier and a bottom tier, wherein the top tier is capable of receiving the first container disposed thereon. The system further features a second container having at least one wall and at least one bottom, and capable of being disposed on the bottom tier.

[0021] In another aspect, the invention features the second container being complementary in shape to the first container.

[0022] In another aspect, the invention features the first container being deeper than the second container.

[0023] In another aspect, the invention features the second container including at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment.

[0024] In another aspect, the invention features the at least first compartment and the at least second compartment of the second container being complementary in shape to and aligning with the at least two compartments of the first container.

[0025] In another aspect, the invention features the at least first compartment of the second container including a means for heating.

[0026] In another aspect, the invention features the at least second compartment of the second container including a means for cooling.

[0027] In another aspect, the invention features the first container including at least one wall that separates the at least two compartments of the first container.

[0028] In another aspect, the invention features the at least one wall including an insulator.

[0029] In another aspect, the invention features at least one of the following items including a means for heating: the at least one wall of the first container, the at least one bottom of the first container, the at least one wall of the second container, the at least one bottom of the second container, the at least one wall separating the at least two compartments of the first container, and at least one wall separating at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment of the second container.

[0030] In another aspect, the invention features at least one of the following items including a means for cooling: the at least one wall of the first container, the at least one bottom of the first container, the at least one wall of the second container, the at least one bottom of the second container, the at least one wall separating the at least two compartments of the first container, and at least one wall separating at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment of the second container.

[0031] In another aspect, the invention features the first container including at least a third compartment for holding a food item to be served at room temperature.

[0032] In another aspect, the invention features the at least first compartment of the first container being larger in size than the at least second compartment of the first container.

[0033] In another aspect, the invention features the at least first compartment of the first container being sized and shaped to receive a main entrée food item.

[0034] In another aspect, the invention features the at least second compartment of the first container being sized and shaped to receive a side food item.

[0035] In another aspect, the invention features the first container including at least a third compartment to receive a side food item.

[0036] In another aspect, the invention features the at least second compartment including a hinge so that the at least second compartment can be configured to collapse into the at least first compartment of the first container.

[0037] In another aspect, the invention features the at least second compartment and the at least third compartment each including a hinge so that the at least second compartment and the at least third compartment can be configured to collapse into the at least first compartment of the first container.

[0038] A method of the invention can be used for serving food. The method includes the step of (a) providing a serving container system featuring a first container having at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment, a support structure having a top tier and a bottom tier, wherein the first container is disposed on the top tier, and a second container capable of being disposed on the bottom tier. The method further includes the steps of: (b) placing food items that are to be served heated into the at least first compartment of the first container; (c) positioning a means for heating in the second container and beneath the at least first compartment of the first container; (d) placing food items that are to be served chilled into the at least second compartment of the first container; and (e) positioning a means for cooling in the second container and beneath the at least second compartment of the first container.

[0039] Another method of the invention includes the step of (f) serving all food items for a meal in the first container of the serving container system.

[0040] Unless otherwise defined, all technical terms used herein have the same meaning as commonly understood by one of ordinary skill in the art to which this invention belongs. Although methods and materials similar or equivalent to those described herein can be used in the practice or testing of the present invention, suitable methods and materials are
described below. All publications, patent applications, patents and other references mentioned herein are incorporated by reference in their entirety. In the case of conflict, the present specification, including definitions will control.

**BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

**[0041]** FIG. 1 is a perspective view of the system.

**DETAILED DESCRIPTION**

**[0042]** The invention provides a system for serving food. In particular, the invention features a system for serving food that permits a user to control the temperature at which multiple food items served in a meal are maintained. According to **FIG. 1**, the system **10** can include a first container **12**, a support structure **14**, and a second container **16**.

**[0043]** The first container **12** may feature at least one wall 18, at least one bottom 20, and at least two compartments. The first container **12** can also be deeper than the second container **16**. In an exemplary embodiment of the system, the first container **12** can include a main compartment **22** and four to eight side compartments **24**, however, for purposes of explanation, the first container and second container will be discussed herein as having two compartments (a first compartment and a second compartment as part of each container). The side compartments **24** can be smaller in area than the main compartment **22**. The side compartments **24** can be greater or smaller in volume than the main compartment **22**. In one embodiment, the compartments **22** and **24** of the first container **12** can be equivalent in depth. In another embodiment, the compartments of the first container **22** and **24** can vary in depth. In another embodiment, the main compartment **22** can be shallower in depth than the side compartments **24**. In still another embodiment, the main compartment **22** can be deeper in depth than the side compartments **24**. In yet another embodiment, the side compartments **24** can be identical or different in shape, area size, volume, and/or depth.

**[0044]** In an exemplary embodiment, the first container **12** may include a generally planar and horizontal top surface **26** that can include unitary compartments (e.g., **22** and **24**) formed by recesses in the top surface. The recesses include closed bottoms **20** for holding food items placed therein. The top surface **26** of the first container **12** of this embodiment may be divided into two or more sections, e.g., one section **26** having at least one compartment for receiving a main entrée food item, one section **26** having at least one compartment for receiving a food item that is to be served cold, and one section **26** having at least one compartment for receiving a food item that is to be served hot. The sections of the first container may be separated by hinges **28** or other rotating means that permit the sections and their corresponding compartments to be collapsed for storage or washing of the system. The section that includes the main compartment can be larger in area size and may include deeper recesses than the section or sections including the side compartments.

**[0045]** In another embodiment, the recesses may be shaped and sized to receive one or more separate containers that can be inserted into and seated within the recesses. In this embodiment, the first container can be constructed so that the bottom of each recess may be either open or closed.

**[0046]** In another exemplary embodiment, the first container can be decorative in shape and design. For example, the first container may be constructed in the shape of an animal, person, plant, religious symbol, holiday symbol, or any other shape. In one embodiment, the first container may be constructed in the shape of a fish. In that embodiment, the body of the fish may form the main compartment while the fins and tail may form the side compartments.

**[0047]** The support structure **14** may include a top tier **30** and a bottom tier **32**. The top tier can be capable of receiving the first container disposed thereon, and the bottom tier can be capable of receiving the second container disposed thereon. Although any support structure capable of supporting the first container and second container and suspending the first container above the second container is contemplated by the inventors, in one embodiment, the support structure can be constructed as a rack that includes one or more vertical support elements attached to a base. The top tier and bottom tier may be constructed as horizontal platforms or grates on which the first and second containers, respectively, may be placed. The top and bottom tiers may also be adjustable on the support structure so that the vertical distance between the top and bottom tiers may be altered by the user. The support structure can also be constructed so that the first container, the second container, or both containers are removably connectable to the support structure.

**[0048]** The second container **16** can have at least one wall **34** and at least one bottom **36**. In an exemplary embodiment, the second container may be shaped and sized so as to be capable of being disposed on the bottom tier of the support structure. In an exemplary embodiment of the system, the second container can also be complementary in shape to the first container. The second container may further include at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment. The first compartment and the second compartment of the second container may be complementary in shape to and align with the two compartments of the first container.

**[0049]** In an exemplary embodiment of the system, the first compartment and second compartment can include an identical number of compartments wherein the compartments of the second container are complementary in shape and area size to the compartments of the first container. The compartments of the second container may be, but are not necessarily, identical in volume or depth to the compartments of the first container.

**[0050]** In an exemplary embodiment, at least one compartment of the second container **16** can feature a means for heating **38** such as, for example, a flame source, a heating element, or an infrared producing heating element. Any of these heating means may be included in plurality in the second container. The flame source can be one or more candles, coals, or charcoal. The flame source may also be a gas canister, torch, or burner, such as the type that burn butane, propane, or another food-safe fuel. Heating elements may include electric range- and oven-type heating elements or heated stones. Acceptable infrared heating elements may be ceramic, metal sheath, quartz lamp, or quartz tube elements. Chemical heat packs may also be placed into the compartment and used as heating means.

**[0051]** In another embodiment, the heated compartment of the second container may be filled with water that is heated by one of the aforementioned means or that is heated in another manner and poured into the compartment. The compartment of the first container is to be heated can be rested at least partially within the bath of heated water to heat the food item contained in the first container compartment.
The means for heating may include controls that permit the temperature to be adjusted or for the heating means to be turned off.

In an exemplary embodiment, the second container can also feature at least one compartment that includes a means for cooling such as, for example, ice, cold water, chemical cold packs, or a refrigeration or other suitable food cooling system. In embodiments making use of ice or cold water as the cooling means, the compartment of the first container that is to be cooled can be rested at least partially within the ice bath or cold water bath contained within the second container compartment in order to cool the food item in the first container compartment that the user desires to cool or chill. The means for cooling may include controls that permit the temperature to be adjusted or for the cooling means to be turned off.

In an exemplary embodiment of the system, the first container may include at least one wall that separates the two compartments of the first container. The wall can feature an insulator to assist in regulating the temperature within each compartment. Any suitable insulating may be incorporated inside the walls of the compartments, but preferably, the insulator can be constructed from a food-safe material in case of breakage of an exterior surface of the wall in which an interior portion of the wall and the insulator might be exposed. Any wall or bottom of the first and second containers may feature a heating means including, without limitation, at least one wall of the first container, at least one bottom of the first container, at least one wall of the second container, at least one bottom of the second container, at least one wall separating the two compartments of the first container, and at least one wall separating the first and second compartments of the second container. Likewise, any wall or bottom of the first and second containers may feature a cooling means including, without limitation, at least one wall of the first container, at least one bottom of the first container, at least one wall of the second container, at least one bottom of the second container, at least one wall separating the two compartments of the first container, and at least one wall separating the first and second compartments of the second container.

In another embodiment, the first container may feature a third compartment for holding a food item that is to be served at room temperature. In some embodiments, one or more compartments of the second container may not include heating or cooling means, and these temperature-unregulated compartments may be aligned beneath the first container compartments in which food is placed for serving at room temperature.

In another embodiment, the heating and cooling means can be incorporated into the walls and bottoms of the compartments of the first container so that the second container is not required to be used. In this embodiment, use of the support structure may also be omitted, however, the support structure may still be desirable for use to elevate the first container above a table or countertop surface to prevent heat or condensation damage to that surface.

In an exemplary embodiment of the system, each side compartment of the first container may be attached to the main compartment via a hinge. Side compartment of the second container may be similarly attached to a main compartment of the second container via hinges. By manipulating each side compartment on its hinge, the side compartments can be configured to collapse into the main compartment of the first container. The side compartments may be collapsed and folded into a main recess of the main compartment (the same recess into which food items are placed), or, in another embodiment, the main compartment may include a plurality of side recesses into which the hinged side compartments may be folded for storage. In place of hinges, any other suitable fastening means, or combinations of fastening means, such as, for example, hooks, latches, tongue-and-groove configurations, and brackets may also be used.

In another embodiment, the side compartments of the first container may be removably connectable to the main compartment. This configuration can permit the first container to be disassembled into multiple pieces for washing or storage.

The first and second container may be constructed from the same or from different materials, but in an exemplary embodiment, can be constructed from the same material. Any food-safe material may be used to construct the first and second containers such as, for example, ceramic, stainless steel, stone, glass, or a combination of these materials. For example, compartments of the first container and second container can be constructed from one, two, three, four, or more materials. The support structure can also be constructed from one or more of the aforementioned materials as well as plastic, metal, porcelain, crystal, or other suitable material or combination of materials capable of supporting the first container, second container, and the food items that may be placed therein.

The invention also features a method for serving food. The method includes the step of providing a serving container system such as, for example, the one described herein above. In another step, food items that are to be served heated can be placed into a heated compartment of the first container. In another step, food items that are to be served chilled can be placed into the cooled compartment of the first container. Means for heating in the second container can be positioned below the heated compartment of the first container to heat the food contained therein, and means for cooling can be positioned in the second container beneath the cooled compartment of the first container to chill the food contained therein. If a food item placed into one of the compartments of the first container is to be served at room temperature, the heating or cooling means may be deactivated.

In another step of the method, all food items for a meal may be served in the first container of the serving container system. The main entrée of the meal, such as, for example, a meat or fish, may be placed into the main compartment of the first container. Side items, such as, for example, fruits, nuts, salads, vegetables, snacks, or desserts, may be placed into the side compartments of the first container.

OTHER EMBODIMENTS

It is to be understood that while the invention has been described in conjunction with the detailed description thereof, the foregoing description is intended to illustrate and not limit the scope of the invention, which is defined by the scope of the appended claims. Other aspects, advantages, and modifications are within the scope of the following claims.

What is claimed is:
1. A method for serving food, the method comprising the steps of:
   (a) providing a serving container system comprising:
      a first container comprising at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment;
a support structure comprising a top tier and a bottom tier; wherein the first container is disposed on the top tier; and
a second container capable of being disposed on the bottom tier;
(b) placing food items that are to be served heated into the at least first compartment of the first container;
(c) positioning a means for heating in the second container and beneath the at least first compartment of the first container;
(d) placing food items that are to be served chilled into the at least second compartment of the first container; and
(e) positioning a means for cooling in the second container and beneath the at least second compartment of the first container.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the method further comprises the step of:
(f) serving all food items for a meal in the first container of the serving container system.

3. A system for serving food, comprising:
a first container comprising at least one wall, at least one bottom, and at least two compartments;
a support structure comprising a top tier and a bottom tier, wherein the top tier is capable of receiving the first container disposed thereon; and
a second container comprising at least one wall and at least one bottom, and capable of being disposed on the bottom tier.

4. The system of claim 3, wherein the second container is complementary in shape to the first container.

5. The system of claim 3, wherein the first container is deeper than the second container.

6. The system of claim 3, wherein the second container comprises at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment.

7. The system of claim 6, wherein the at least first compartment and the at least second compartment of the second container are complementary in shape to and align with the at least two compartments of the first container.

8. The system of claim 6, wherein the at least first compartment of the second container comprises a means for heating.

9. The system of claim 6, wherein the at least second compartment of the second container comprises a means for cooling.

10. The system of claim 3, wherein the first container comprises at least one wall that separates the at least two compartments of the first container.

11. The system of claim 10, wherein the at least one wall comprises an insulator.

12. The system of claim 10, wherein at least one item selected from the group consisting of:
the at least one wall of the first container;
the at least one bottom of the first container;
the at least one wall of the second container;
the at least one bottom of the second container;
the at least one wall separating the at least two compartments of the first container; and
at least one wall separating at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment of the second container,
comprises a means for heating.

13. The system of claim 10, wherein at least one item selected from the group consisting of:
the at least one wall of the first container;
the at least one bottom of the first container;
the at least one wall of the second container;
the at least one bottom of the second container;
the at least one wall separating the at least two compartments of the first container; and
at least one wall separating at least a first compartment and at least a second compartment of the second container,
comprises a means for cooling.

14. The system of claim 3, wherein the first container comprises at least a third compartment for holding a food item to be served at room temperature.

15. The system of claim 3, wherein the at least first compartment of the first container is larger in size than the at least second compartment of the first container.

16. The system of claim 15, wherein the at least first compartment of the first container is sized and shaped to receive a main entrée food item.

17. The system of claim 3, wherein the at least second compartment of the first container is sized and shaped to receive a side food item.

18. The system of claim 3, wherein the first container comprises at least a third compartment to receive a side food item.

19. The system of claim 3, wherein the at least second compartment comprises a hinge so that the at least second compartment can be configured to collapse into the at least first compartment of the first container.

20. The system of claim 18, wherein the at least second compartment and the at least third compartment each comprise a hinge so that the at least second compartment and the at least third compartment can be configured to collapse into the at least first compartment of the first container.

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