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DESCRIPTION

Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to a method of processing a food object while the food object is being conveyed.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Imaging equipment such as X-ray devices are becoming more and more important within the food industry. One implementation is to use X-ray devices in processing fish fillets, where the acquired X-ray data after passing through the fish fillets are used as an operation parameter for operating a cutting device, e.g. a high pressure water jet cutter, in cutting the fish fillets (or any other food product) into smaller pieces. If the X-ray device, however, detects an undesired object, e.g. bones, the whole fish fillet will not be cut but rejected and sent to a rework station where typically an operator manually removes the undesired object. Subsequently, the processed fish fillet is recirculated into the X-ray device, but this recirculation is typically performed manually. The problem with this approach is that finding the undesired object can be a tedious and time consuming process. This approach also leads to excessive handling of the raw material.

[0003] EP3081090 discloses a cutting apparatus comprising a cutter (103) arranged above a gap extending across a conveyor belt. An imaging system produces image data of the food items, and a computer system is adapted to process said image data to generate operation parameters for operating movement of a cutter.

[0004] WO02/43502 discloses a method of detecting material desired to be removed from a workpiece comprising scanning the workpiece; determining existence of undesirable material in the workpiece based on the scanning and if it is determined that undesirable material exists, performing a selectable step of cutting out a portion of the workpiece that contains the undesirable material.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] It would be advantageous to achieve an improved solution in processing food objects

where the throughput is increased such that not the whole object needs to be rejected if an undesired object is detected.

[0006] In general, the invention preferably seeks to mitigate, alleviate or eliminate one or more of the above mentioned disadvantages singly or in any combination. In particular, it may be seen as an object of the present invention to provide an improved method of processing food objects that solves the above mentioned problems, or other problems, of the prior art.

[0007] According to a first aspect of the invention, a method is provided according to claim 1.

[0008] Accordingly, the food object will not be treated differently depending on whether such undesired objects are detected or not and therefore the time needed to convey the food object is utilized in performing the cutting step. Thus, valuable time is saved which enhances the throughput. The food object may be any type of a food object, such as, but not limited to, a fish fillet, a piece of meat, e.g. poultry meat etc.

[0009] Also, the fact that it is now known which of the smaller food pieces contains the undesired object(s), only that particular one (or more) smaller food piece(s) may be removed from the remaining food object and rejected and sent to e.g. a rework station where typically an operator manually removes the undesired object. Thus, less raw material will be rejected (instead of rejecting the whole food object), which facilitates looking for the undesired objects meaning that less time will be spent on the rework and thus the overall throughput is further enhanced. The undesired object may include, but is not limited to, bones, bloodspots, gapings, or nematodes.

In one embodiment, said step of cutting the food object comprises the step of determining a pattern based on the image data, and performing the cutting in accordance with the pattern.

[0010] The pattern could be determined dynamically in accordance to said acquired image data for each time a food object is processed, i.e. a new pattern is generated for each new food object. In that way, depending on e.g. the size and/shape and/or thickness, the cutting of the food object is determined, preferably aiming at maximizing the yield.

[0011] In one embodiment, said image data comprises X-ray data obtained by means of exposing the food object with an X-ray beam and processing the intensities of the X-ray beam after penetrating through the food object. In that way, undesired objects such as bones, metal and the like may be detected. Moreover, the detected intensities may be processed to estimate the weight of the food object, which may be used as an additional operation parameter in cutting the food object into e.g. fixed portions.

[0012] In one embodiment, the method further comprises automatically separating those smaller food pieces containing the undesired objects from the food object. This may e.g. be performed using a robotic system comprising a robotic arm, where the location of the smaller food piece or pieces containing undesired objects is used as a control signal to the robotic system for automatically removing these smaller food piece or pieces containing said

undesired object(s) from the remaining part of the food object.

[0013] Another alternative to automatically separating those smaller food pieces containing the undesired objects from the food object may comprise using a conveyor assembly, e.g. slidable conveyor or conveyor part, a pivotable conveyor or conveyor part or the like, which is well known to a person skilled in the art, where the location of the smaller food piece or pieces containing undesired objects is used as a control signal to the conveyor assembly, e.g. to control the temporal opening between adjacent conveyors. Thus, only the piece or pieces containing undesired objects is rejected.

[0014] In one embodiment, the step of determining, based on the acquired image data, whether the food object contains undesired objects comprises detecting whether detected objects are above a pre-defined size range, wherein, if the detected objects exceed the pre-defined size range, the detected objects are considered to be undesired objects. Accordingly, it may be decided that if such objects are e.g. bones, that the length of the bones may be the pre-defined size range, e.g. all bones being 1mm or less are not considered to be undesired objects, whereas all bones above 1mm are considered to be undesired objects. The width of the detected objects may also be considered as an additional or a dominant factor in this pre-defined size range.

[0015] According to another aspect of the invention a system is provided according to claim 10.

[0016] The imaging means may as an example selected from one or more of the following: an X-ray apparatus, Near Infrared (NIR) device, a RGB, hyperspectral imaging and fluorescence, a digital camera.

[0017] The cutting means may as an example comprise a high pressure water cutter or any type of cutting blades, e.g. circular rotation cutting blade.

[0018] In one embodiment, the system further comprises an automatic removing device for utilizing the identification of which of the smaller food pieces contain the undesired objects in automatically removing these smaller food pieces from the remaining part of the food object. The automatic removing device could be a robotic system comprising at least one robotic arm or a conveyor assembly.

[0019] In general the various aspects of the invention may be combined and coupled in any way possible within the scope of the invention. These and other aspects, features and/or advantages of the invention will be apparent from, and elucidated with reference to the embodiments described hereinafter.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0020] Embodiments of the invention will be described, by way of example only, with reference to the drawings, in which

figure 1 shows a flowchart of an embodiment of a method according to the present invention of processing a food object while the food object is being conveyed,

figures 2 and 3 show two examples of where a fish fillet, a white fish, has been automatically cut into smaller pieces, and

figure 4 shows a block diagram of a system according to the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS

[0021] Figure 1 shows a flowchart of an embodiment of a method according to the present invention of processing a food object while the food object is being conveyed. The food object may be a fish fillet, poultry meat, beef, pork and the like. In the following, it will be assumed that the food object is a fish fillet.

[0022] In step (S1) 101 image data of the food object is acquired. The image data includes in one embodiment X-ray data obtained by means of exposing the food object with an X-ray beam and processing the intensities of the X-ray beam after penetrating through the food object. This is especially suitable in detecting bones, metal objects or any other undesired objects in the fish fillet.

[0023] The image data may also include digital data obtained by means of an inspection device such as a digital camera and where said undesired objects are selected from one or more of bloodspots, nematodes or gapings.

[0024] In step (S2) 102 the food object is cut into smaller food pieces, e.g. loin part, belly part, tail part etc. This may be performed based on pre-fixed cutting patterns. In a preferred embodiment this cutting is determined dynamically in accordance to said acquired image data. This means that depending on the size/shape/geometry of the food object the cutting is determined accordingly.

[0025] In step (S3) 103 it is determined, based on the acquired image data, whether the food object contains undesired objects.

[0026] In step (S4) 104, in case such undesired objects in (S4) are detected, it is identified which of the smaller food pieces contain the undesired objects.

[0027] In step (S5) 105, the method may further comprise automatically separating those smaller food pieces containing the undesired objects from the food object. This may be

performed via any type of a reject conveyor device or conveyor assembly such as by arranging two conveyors in an end-to-end arrangement and temporarily withdrawing one of the ends and create a gap there between through which the food pieces containing the undesired objects may be dropped down to a reject area or to a rework station where e.g. an operator may manually process the rejected piece. This may also be done using any type of a robotic arm, or an operator may be informed via any type of a device, e.g. via a display, which of the food piece(s) contain the undesired objects.

[0028] Figure 2 shows one example where a fish fillet 200, a white fish, has been automatically cut into smaller pieces and where the cut includes cutting around the pin bones 205 in the fish fillet, where the pieces include a loin part 201, a belly part 202 and belly portion 203, and a tail part 204. This cutting may e.g. be performed using a high pressure water jet, but other cutting tools well known to a skilled person in the art may of course be used.

[0029] The image data comprise X-ray data that are processed and based thereon it is decided how to cut this particular fish fillet depending on the size/shape of the fish fillet, i.e. the cutting is performed in a dynamic way. Moreover, the X-ray data are processed to determine whether any of the cut pieces contain undesired objects, such as bones or any other undesired fragments. In this case, the X-ray data indicates that a small piece of a bone is within the box 207 (in addition to the pin bone area 205) in the tail part 204, and another bone within the box 206 at the loin part. In this case, the size of these bone fragments are determined and based thereon it is determined whether or not they should be considered as being undesired objects. As an example, a bone of 2 mm length or less may be considered as not being undesired object, whereas bone fragments above 2 mm is considered as being an undesired object. In this particular case, only the size of the bone within box 206 may be categorized as being an undesired object and thus only this loin part is to be removed/rejected to a rework area where e.g. an operator will easily detect the undesired object, in this case the detected bone, as discussed above, instead of removing the whole fish fillet to e.g. said rework station.

[0030] Figure 3 shows another fillet 300 that has been cut into similar pieces 301 - 304, but where no undesired object has been detected and thus no piece needs to be rejected.

[0031] Figure 4 depicts a block diagram of a system 400 according to the present invention for processing a food object while the food object is being conveyed by a conveying means. The system comprises an image means (I_M) 401 for acquiring image data of the food object, a cutting means (C_M) 402 for cutting the food object into smaller food pieces, a processor (P) 403 for determining, based on the acquired image data, whether the food object contains undesired objects, and in case such undesired objects are detected, identifying which of the smaller food pieces contain the undesired objects. The system further comprises an automatic removing device (R_D) 404 for utilizing the identification of which of the smaller food pieces contain the undesired objects in automatically removing these smaller food pieces from the remaining part of the food object. The automatic removing device (R_D) 404 may be a robot, or a reject structure embedded in a conveyor.

[0032] The imaging means may comprise one or more of the following: an X-ray apparatus, a Near Infrared (NIR) device, a RGB, hyperspectral imaging and fluorescence, a digital camera. The cutting means may in one embodiment comprise a high pressure water cutter.

[0033] The automatic removing device may comprise a conveyor assembly the automatically, e.g. two conveyors arranged in an end-to-end arrangement (one end ends where the other one starts) where e.g. one end of the conveyors is connected to a moving mechanism that allows a temporal opening between the two conveyors, where in response to a control signal indicating which of the smaller food pieces contain said undesired objects (e.g. bone), the temporal opening is created and the smaller food piece (or pieces) containing the smaller food object(s) is rejected and e.g. recirculated to e.g. an operator that may manually remove e.g. the bone therefrom, and even recirculate the processed piece back into the image means where it may be detected if the undesired object has fully been removed or not.

[0034] The scope of protection of the current invention is defined by the appended claims.

REFERENCES CITED IN THE DESCRIPTION

Cited references

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Patent documents cited in the description

- [EP3081090A \[0003\]](#)
- [WO0243502A \[0004\]](#)

Patentkrav

1. Fremgangsmåde til forarbejdning af et fødevareemne, mens fødevareemnet fremføres, som omfatter:
 - 5 • optagelse af billeddata af fødevareemnet (101),
 - skæring af fødevareemnet i mindre fødevarestykker (102),
 - bestemmelse baseret på de opnåede billeddata af, om fødevareemnet indeholder uønskede objekter (103), og i tilfælde af påvisning af sådanne uønskede objekter
 - 10 • identificering af, hvilke af de små fødevarestykker, der indeholder de uønskede objekter (104),kendetegnet ved, at fødevareemnet ikke behandles forskelligt, hvad enten der påvises eller ikke påvises uønskede objekter.
- 15 2. Fremgangsmåde ifølge krav 1, hvor trinnet med skæring af fødevareemnet omfatter et trin til bestemmelse af et mønster baseret på billeddataene og udførelse af skæringen i overensstemmelse med mønstret.
- 20 3. Fremgangsmåde ifølge krav 2, hvor mønstret bestemmes dynamisk i overensstemmelse med et sæt af billeddata for hvert modtagne fødevareemne.
4. Fremgangsmåde ifølge et hvilket som helst af ovennævnte krav, hvor billeddataene omfatter røntgendata opnået ved hjælp af eksponering af fødevareemnet for en røntgenstråle og behandling af intensiteten af røntgenstrålen efter gennemtrængning af fødevareemnet.
- 25 5. Fremgangsmåde ifølge et hvilket som helst af ovennævnte krav, som yderligere omfatter automatisk separering af de mindre fødevarestykker, der indeholder de uønskede objekter, fra fødevareemnet (105) baseret på identificeringen af hvilke af de mindre fødevarestykker, der indeholder de uønskede objekter
- 30 (104).
6. Fremgangsmåde ifølge et hvilket som helst af ovennævnte krav, hvor de uønskede objekter indbefatter en eller flere af

følgende: knogler, blodpletter, huller eller nematoder.

7. Fremgangsmåde ifølge et hvilket som helst af ovennævnte krav, hvor de opnåede billeddata omfatter digitale data opnået ved hjælp af en inspektionsenhed, såsom et digitalkamera, RGB-hyperspektral billeddannelse og fluorescens, og hvor de uønskede objekter er valgt blandt en eller flere af: blodspletter, nematoder eller huller.

8. Fremgangsmåde ifølge et hvilket som helst af ovennævnte krav, hvor fødevareemnet er en fiskefilet.

9. Fremgangsmåde ifølge et hvilket som helst af ovennævnte krav, hvor trinnet til bestemmelse baseret på de opnåede billeddata af, om fødevareemnet indeholder uønskede objekter, omfatter påvisning af, om påviste objekter er over et foruddefineret størrelsesinterval, hvor de påviste objekter, hvis de overstiger det foruddefinerede størrelsesinterval, betragtes som uønskede objekter.

10. System til forarbejdning af et fødevareemne, mens fødevareemnet fremføres ved hjælp af et fremføringsmiddel, som omfatter:

- et middel til optagelse af billeddata af fødevareemnet (101),
 - et middel til skæring af fødevareemnet i mindre fødevarestykker (102),
 - en processor til:
 - bestemmelse baseret på de opnåede billeddata af, om fødevareemnet indeholder uønskede objekter (103), og i tilfælde af påvisning af sådanne uønskede objekter
 - identificering af, hvilke af de mindre fødevarestykker der indeholder de uønskede objekter (104),
- kendetegnet ved, at fødevareemnet ikke behandles forskelligt, hvad enten der påvises eller ikke påvises uønskede objekter.

11. System ifølge krav 10, hvor billeddannelsesmidlet er valgt blandt en eller flere af følgende:
et røntgenapparat,

en nær infrarød (NIR)-enhed,
RGB-hyperspektral billedannelse og fluorescens,
et digitalkamera.

- 5 12. System ifølge krav 10 eller 11, hvor midlet til skæring
omfatter en højtryksvandstråleskærer.
- 10 13. System ifølge et hvilket som helst af kravene 10 til 12,
som yderligere omfatter en automatisk fjernelsesenhed til
udnyttelse af identificeringen af, hvilke af de mindre
fødevarestykker der indeholder de uønskede objekter, ved
automatisk fjernelse af disse mindre fødevarestykker fra den
resterende del af fødevareemnet.
- 15 14. System ifølge krav 13, hvor den automatiske fjernelsesenhed
er valgt blandt en eller flere af følgende: et robotsystem, der
omfatter mindst én robotarm, eller en transportørindretning.

DRAWINGS

Drawing

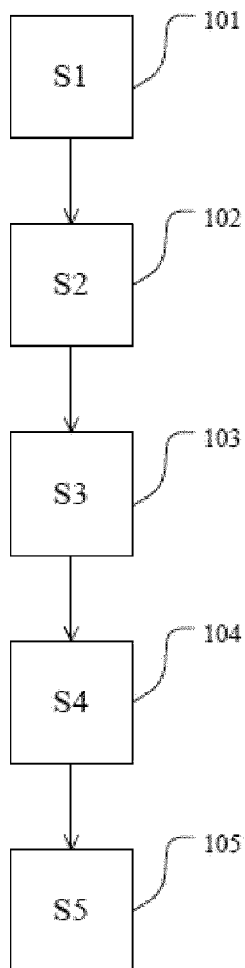


FIG. 1

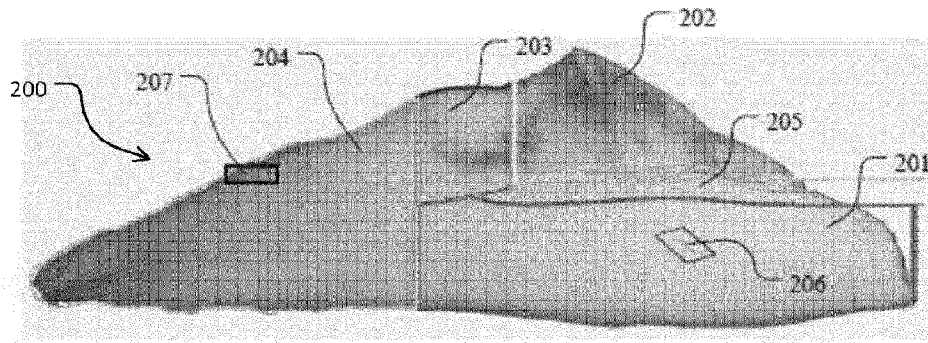


FIG. 2

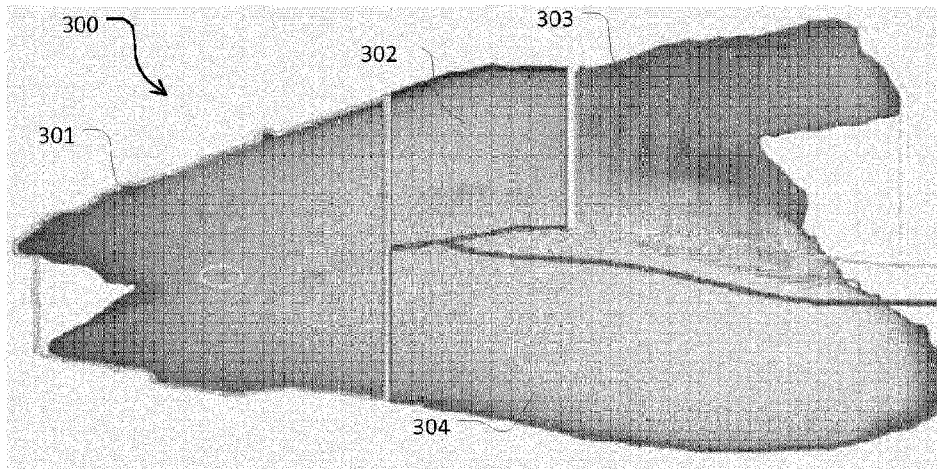


FIG. 3

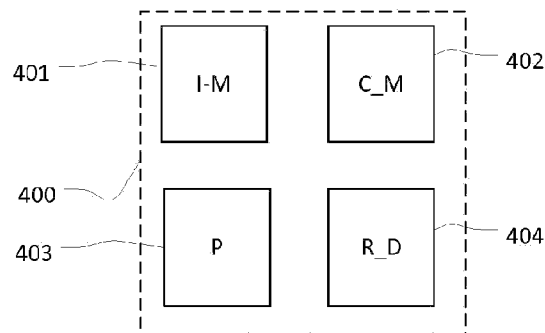


FIG. 4