MULTI-ITEM PACKAGED FOOD PRODUCT

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Filed: Sep. 9, 2013

Related U.S. Application Data

Provisional application No. 61/699,131, filed on Sep. 10, 2012.

Abstract

Packages for food products and food products packaged in such packages are described. A multi-item packaged food product may include food items, a bottom portion defining containers, and a top portion releasably sealed to the bottom portion such that food items are received in the containers. The top portion defines moveably coupled cover portions, each cover portion sealing at least one food item within a corresponding one of the containers. The top portion is peelable in a first direction to remove at least two cover portions from the corresponding containers, and the top portion is peelable in a second direction to remove a single cover portion from a single container.
MULTI-ITEM PACKAGED FOOD PRODUCT

[0001] This application claims the benefit of co-pending U.S. Provisional Application Ser. No. 61/699,131 filed on Sep. 10, 2012, which is hereby expressly incorporated by reference in its entirety for all purposes.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present disclosure relates generally to the field of packaged food products, and more specifically, to multi-item packaged food products providing improved opening and separability features for opening one or more individual packages.

BACKGROUND

[0003] There are many challenges associated with providing food product packaging for accommodating multiple food items. Structural integrity considerations as well as visual appearance considerations can be considered, both of which may, at least in part, determine the success of a product with consumers.

[0004] Accordingly, various embodiments disclosed herein are directed to improved packaging for food products and similar consumer products.

SUMMARY

[0005] One embodiment relates to a multi-item packaged food product including a plurality of food items; a bottom portion defining a plurality of containers; and a top portion releasably sealed to the bottom portion such that the plurality of food items are received in the plurality of containers. The top portion defines a plurality of removable coupled cover portions, each cover portion sealing at least one food item within a corresponding one of the plurality of containers. The top portion is peelable in a first direction to remove at least two cover portions from the corresponding containers; and the top portion is peelable in a second direction to remove a single cover portion from a single container.

[0006] Another embodiment related to a package assembly includes a top defining at least one pull tab and a plurality of second pull tabs, and a bottom including a thermoformed tray defining a plurality of containers and releasably sealed to the top. An application of a force to the first pull tab tends to release the top from at least two of the plurality of containers, and an application of a force to one of the second pull tabs tends to release only a portion of the top from only a single one of the plurality of containers.

[0007] Another embodiment relates to a packaged food product including a bottom defining a plurality of containers, each container comprising a bottom wall defining at least one raised portion configured to maintain a space between a food product and a remainder of the bottom wall; and a top removably coupled to the bottom, the top defining a plurality of peel starter portions usable to remove at least a portion of the top from the bottom. The top and bottom collectively define a plurality of individual packages that are removable relative to one another while the top is removably coupled to the bottom.

[0008] Another embodiment relates to a packaged food product including a package assembly comprising a bottom portion coupled to a top portion, the bottom and top portions being configured to be folded about a line between containers and maintained in a folded position. The bottom portion defines a plurality of containers, each container comprising an integrated drip tray formed by at least one embossed portion configured to support a food product above a remainder of a bottom of the container.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] FIGS. 1A, 1B and 1C are a series of illustrations of a multi-item packaged food product according to a first exemplary embodiment.

[0010] FIGS. 2A and 2B are a series of illustrations of a bottom portion of the multi-item packaged food product of FIG. 1 according to an exemplary embodiment.

[0011] FIG. 3 is a top view of a top portion of the multi-item packaged food product of FIG. 1 according to an exemplary embodiment.

[0012] FIGS. 4A, 4B and 4C are a series of illustrations of a multi-item packaged food product according to a second exemplary embodiment.

[0013] FIGS. 5A and 5B are a series of illustrations of a bottom portion of the multi-item packaged food product of FIG. 4 according to an exemplary embodiment.

[0014] FIG. 6 is a top view of a top portion of the multi-item packaged food product of FIG. 4 according to an exemplary embodiment.

[0015] FIGS. 7A, 7B and 7C are a series of illustrations of a multi-item packaged food product according to a third exemplary embodiment.

[0016] FIG. 8 is a series of illustrations of a top and bottom portion of the multi-item packaged food product of FIG. 7 according to an exemplary embodiment.

[0017] FIGS. 9A, 9B and 9C are a series of illustrations of a multi-item packaged food product according to a fourth exemplary embodiment.

[0018] FIG. 10 is a series of illustrations of a top and bottom portion of the multi-item packaged food product of FIG. 9 according to an exemplary embodiment.

[0019] FIGS. 11A, 11B and 11C are a series of illustrations of a multi-item packaged food product according to another exemplary embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0020] Referring to the FIGURES generally, various embodiments disclosed herein relate to multi-item packaged food products, where the multi-item packaged food product includes a package assembly that defines a number of individual packages that are coupled together. In some embodiments, individual packages having food products therein may be removed from one another for preparation and consumption. In further embodiments, the top portion (e.g., a flexible polymer film, etc.) may be removed such that a user may choose to remove the entire top portion from the bottom portion, or alternatively, the user may remove only that portion of the top portion that corresponds to one of the individual packages, thereby keeping the remaining food products sealed within the other packages. In yet further embodiments, one or more of the containers may include an integrated “drip tray” formed, for example, by raised/embossed portions in the bottom of the containers, such that food products such as sausages, etc. can be cooked in the container and grease, oils, etc. released from the food product during preparation can be directed to the drip tray beneath the food product.
Referring now to FIGS. 1A, 1B and 1C, a series of illustrations of a multi-item packaged food products are shown as packaged food product 10 according to an exemplary embodiment. Packaged food product 10 includes a package assembly 12 and a food product 14 which, as discussed in greater detail below, is distributed between individual packages that make up package assembly 12. Packaged food product 10 may be any of a variety of types of products, including non-refrigerated, refrigerated, or frozen products, and may include food products such as single-component and/or multi-component food products such as sandwiches, breakfast sausages, links, patties, and the like. It should be understood that the various embodiments herein may apply to a wide variety of product types in addition to those specifically disclosed herein.

According to an exemplary embodiment, package assembly 12 includes a top 16 and a bottom 18 that collectively define a plurality of packages 20. According to one embodiment, top 16 is a polymer film configured to seal with one or more portions of bottom 18 (e.g., a lip or flange portion of bottom 18, etc.) in a removable/releasable manner. Top 16 may include graphics, text, etc. on a top surface to provide various types of information to users. Furthermore, top 16 may include one or more peel-starting portions 28 and 38, as discussed in greater detail below. Bottom 18 may be made of a polymer material by way of a molding process, including injection molding, blow-injection molding, thermoforming, vacuum forming, blow molding, sheet molding, etc. In one embodiment, bottom 18 is a thermoformed polymer tray defining a plurality of individual containers (e.g., receptacles, etc.). Bottom 18 may be transparent or semi-transparent. In some embodiments, top 16 may be flexible or rigid and may be a barrier layer or sheet made of a single or multiple layer, metallic and/or polymer material. In one embodiment, top 16 is a poly-coated board.

Referring to FIGS. 2A and 2B, packages 20 form two rows of packages extending from a middle portion 22. The rows of packages 20 and middle portion 22 are in one embodiment configured to be folded along fold lines 26 such that the bottoms of the two rows of packages engage one another and the packaged food product may be displayed in a generally upright position while supported by middle portion 22. Middle portion 22 includes one or more ribs 23 or similar features to provide additional rigidity and provide a level support surface for supporting the packages 20 in a vertical orientation. A band 30 (e.g., a shrink band, etc.) is wrapped around the folded packages 20 to maintain the packages 20 in the folded position during transport, display, etc. In some embodiments, the bottoms of the two rows of packages 20 are formed with corresponding raised/recessed portions that maintain alignment between the rows. In yet further embodiments, as also discussed in greater detail below, the raised/recessed portions may further provide integrated “drip trays” on the interior of the containers.

According to an exemplary embodiment, top 16 and bottom 18 include aligned score lines 24 such that individual packages 20 may be removed from one another. The score lines 24, as well as the fold lines 26, may be formed by perforations, slits, laser scores, etc. that may extend partially or fully through one or both of top 16 and bottom 18. As such, a user may separate one or more packages 20 from package assembly 12. As shown in the FIGURES, package assembly 12 includes six individual packages 20 (formed into two rows of three). According to various other embodiments, more or fewer packages 20 may be included in package assembly 12, and more or fewer rows of packages 20 may be utilized.

In some embodiments, packaged food product 10 may provide users with different options for opening one or more of packages 20. As shown in FIGS. 1A and 1B, top 16 includes multiple covers 34 removably coupled to each other and a middle seal portion 35 and separated by score lines 24 (described below). Top 16 also includes a pair of first pebbleable tab portions 28 (e.g., a pull tab, etc.) and a plurality of second pebbleable tab portions 38. According to an exemplary embodiment, first tab portion 28 is usable to peel away multiple covers 34 from their respective containers 32. For example, should a user grasp first tab portion 28 and pull the tab, top 16 will tend to release from the entire row of packages and along score line 24 dividing the row of packages and middle seal portion 22. As such, top 16 may be provided with two first tab portions 28, with one being associated with each row of packages. In other embodiments, a tab portion may be configured so as to tend to pull the entire top 16 away from bottom 18. According to further embodiments, tab portions 28, 38 and score lines 24 may be configured to enable a user to pull off any desired section of top 16.

In some embodiments, first tab portion 28 is intended to provide a visual indication that the tab portion is usable to open multiple packages. As shown in FIG. 3, first tab portion 28 may define an arc extending along some or all of one of the sides of a package 20. Furthermore, one or more visual indicators (e.g., text, graphics, etc.) may be provided to indicate the proper direction to pull first tab portion 28 (e.g., an arrow, etc.). According to various embodiments, the location and number of first tab portions 28 may be varied relative to the configuration shown in the drawings.

Should a user desire to remove only a single cover 34 from a single container 32, the user may use one of the second tab portions 38. As shown in FIG. 3, a separate tab portion 38 is provided with each individual cover 34. As such, top 16 includes six separate second tab portions 38. Upon a user pulling on one of second tab portions 38, an individual cover 34 will release from the underlying container 32. Score lines 24 are provided in top 16 along the perimeter of each individual cover 34 (e.g., between adjacent packages 20 and between the packages and middle portion 22).

In one embodiment, each second tab portion 38 is formed in a wave-shape having a curved peak, while in other embodiments, other shapes may be used. Furthermore, one or more visual (e.g., text, graphics, etc.) indicators may be provided to indicate the proper direction to pull second tab portions 38 (e.g., an arrow, etc.). According to various embodiments, the location and/or number of second tab portions 38 may be varied relative to the configuration shown in the drawings.

According to an exemplary embodiment, one or both of first tab portions 28 and second tab portions 38 extend beyond the periphery of bottom 18 (e.g., such that a portion of top 16 “overhangs” the edge of bottom 18). This may provide a grasping portion for users to grasp, and avoid having to initially separate top 16 from container 18 in order to open one or more packages 20. According to alternative embodiments, rather than overhanging the edge of bottom 18, top 16 may be left unsealed from bottom 18 in the area of the tab portions 28 or 38.

It should be noted that the various tab portions 28 or 38 may be used to release portions of top 16 from bottom 18 before or after one or more packages are separated from one
another. For example, a user may separate a single package 20 from packaged food product 10, and subsequently use second tab portion 38 to open the individual portion. Alternatively, a user may pull on a single second tab portion 38 while the package 20 is still coupled to one or more other packages 20, such that the user opens only one package 20, yet the container portions of the packages are still coupled together. Similarly, a user may use first tab portion 28 to remove top 16 from an entire row (or a portion of a row) either before or after separating it from the row using, for example, middle portion 22 of packaged food product 10.

[0031] According to an exemplary embodiment, one or more packages 20 may be heated using a microwave oven either prior to or after removing top 16. As such, various food products may be prepared in containers 32, including a variety of meat-based products such as breakfast sausages (e.g., pork sausages, beef sausages, links, patties, etc.) and non-meat based products. In some cases, such as when heating breakfast sausages, the food product may tend to release liquids such as grease, oils, etc. during heating. To keep the food product separate from these liquids, containers 32 may be provided with integrated “drip trays.”

[0032] For example, referring to FIGS. 2A and 2B, in one embodiment container 32 includes one or more raised portions 36 (e.g., embossed portions, projections, supports, etc.) that are raised relative to the remainder of the bottom of the container 32, and are configured to maintain a food product such as a breakfast sausage, link, or the like, spaced apart from any liquids that may be released from the food product during heating. As shown in FIG. 2, raised portions 36 may be a plurality of curved, or contoured raised portions that extend upward within the container. Thus, the bottom of container 32 is defined by raised/embossed portions 36 and recessed/debossed portions 40, such that the raised/embossed portions 36 support the food product, and the recessed/debossed portions 40 contain any liquids release from the food product during heating.

[0033] In one embodiment, the containers in a single row of containers 32 may have the same configuration of raised and recessed portions, and the containers 32 on the opposite side of middle portion 22 may have the raised/recessed portions 36 and 40 reversed, such that when bottom 18 is folded along fold lines 26, the bottoms of the two rows of containers tend to “interlock” such that relative lateral movement between the two rows is prevented. It should be noted that while raised portions 36 are shown as generally having curved, wavy-shaped or contoured features, according to various alternative embodiments, raised portions 36 may take other shapes and forms. In other embodiments, the two rows of containers may be held together in other ways, including a snap-fit, friction fit, adhesives (e.g., one or more glue dots, etc.), a male/female interlocking structure, nesting features, etc.

[0034] According to an exemplary embodiment, to produce multi-item packaged food product 10, bottom 18 is formed (e.g., thermoformed, etc.) to include multiple containers 32. Food product 14 is introduced into each container 32, and top 16 is sealed to bottom 18 to enclose the food product within the individual containers 32. The package components may also be die cut to a desired shape, and provided with perforations, lasers, scores, etc. The package assembly 12 may then be folded into a U-shape structure and banded using a band 30 (e.g., an elastic or shrinkable band, etc.). In some embodiments, band 30 may be omitted and the package held in the folded position using the mating structural features discussed above. This structure provides for both vertical (resting on middle portion 22) and horizontal (resting on one of the rows of packages) merchandising options. Further, packaged food products 10 may also be stacked upon one another (e.g., while in the horizontal orientation). The structural rigidity of packaged food product 10 may be enhanced by the interlocking embossed/debossed features of the container bottoms 18, which may resist twisting/racking between the opposing rows of packages 20.

[0035] In use, a consumer may remove band 30 to unfold multi-item packaged food product 10 and, if desired, remove one or more individual packages 20 from the package assembly 12. Because of the score lines/perforations 24, users may separate individual packages 20 without the use of scissors, knives, etc. The user may then heat the desired portion in a microwave oven while the food product is still within the packages 20. The packages 20 may be prepared without the use of additional containers, paper towels, etc. Because the food products 14 are individually packaged, there is no need to reseal or use any additional packaging (e.g., zip-lock bags, plastic wrap, etc.) to maintain any unused portions of food product 14, as the unused portions are in separately sealed individual packages. In some embodiments, the package 20 may be self-venting. For example, the package 20 may include vent portions formed by perforations, scoring, micro-scoring, weakened areas of the package configured to burst, etc., and the like. In other embodiments, the package 20 may be configured to be pre-vented (e.g., prior to cooking) by the user. For example, the package 20 may be configured to be opened slightly, punched, etc.

[0036] Referring to FIG. 11, a packaged food product 410 is shown according to an exemplary embodiment. Product 410 shares many of the features of product 10 shown herein, except that packages 420 are provided in a single row that is divided by a middle portion 422 (e.g., in contrast to product 10, where a middle portion 22 divides two rows of packages 20). As such, product 410 may provide primary and secondary branding panels for labeling, etc. Furthermore, like product 10, product 410 may provide first and second peepable tab portions 428 and 438 to enable a user to open one or more of containers 420. Because of the position of middle portion 422, product 410 may provide for different display alternatives in terms of how a product can be displayed to consumers.

[0037] Referring now to FIGS. 4A, 4B, 4C, 5A, 5B and 6, a packaged food product 110 is shown according to an exemplary embodiment. Packaged food product 110 may share many of the features of packaged food product 10 illustrated in FIGS. 1-3 except as otherwise noted herein.

[0038] According to an exemplary embodiment, packaged food product 110 includes a package assembly 112 and a food product 114. Food product 114 includes one or more meat products such as sausage patties (e.g., pork sausage patties, etc.) according to an exemplary embodiment. Package assembly 112 includes a top 116 and a bottom 118 and defines a plurality of packages 120. Each package 120 includes a container 132, a cover 134, and raised portions 136 and recessed portions 140 that form an integrated drip tray. Further, package assembly 112 includes first and second tab portions 128, 138 that operate in a similar manner to first and second tab portions 28, 38.

[0039] Referring further to FIGS. 4-6, each container 132 may be formed in the shape of two circular, or arced compartments or receptacles, and multiple containers 132 are joined together by a connecting portion 122. The circular
compartments generally conform to the shape of the food product (e.g., a sausage patty, etc.). According to other embodiments, other shapes and sizes may be used in connection with container 132. Furthermore, package assembly 112 includes two rows of packages 120, with each row including two packages 120.

[0040] Referring now to FIGS. 7A, 7B, 7C and 8, a multi-item packaged food product 210 is shown according to an exemplary embodiment. Packaged food product 210 may share many of the features of packaged food product 10. Packaged food product 210 also includes an outer sleeve 215 that serves to maintain package assembly 212 in a folded position and permits viewing of the food product through a transparent/semi-transparent package assembly 212. Package assembly 212 includes a top 216 and bottom 218 that collectively enclose a food product 214 (e.g., sausage links, etc.). Package assembly 212 may define two individual packages 220 that are joined at a score line 224. Each individual package 220 may include a container 232 and a cover 234. Container 232 may include embossed/debossed features 236 and 240 that provide an integrated drip tray to collect grease, oils, and the like. The container 232 may be transparent or semi-transparent to allow viewing of the food product within the container 232.

[0041] According to an exemplary embodiment, container 232 further includes a debossed tab 217. Tab 217 is formed on an upper lip, or flange, of container 232, and is recessed relative to the remainder of the lip such that when top 216 is sealed to bottom 218, a space remains between top 216 and debossed tab 217, thereby providing an “ez-pee” feature and a graspable portion for users to hold and打开 the container. Debossed tab 217 may take any suitable shape and be provided at any suitable location.

[0042] Referring now to FIGS. 9A, 9B, 9C and 10, a multi-item packaged food product 310 is shown according to an exemplary embodiment. Packaged food product 310 may share many features with packaged food products 10, 110, and 210 disclosed herein. Packaged food product 310 includes an outer sleeve 311 within which a number of individual packages 320 are provided (e.g., four, six, etc.). Each package 320 includes a container 332 and a cover 334 that collectively enclose a food product 314. As shown in FIG. 9, packages 320 are provided separated from each other within sleeve 311. Container 332 includes embossed/debossed portions 336 and 340 that form an integrated drip tray. Container 332 further includes a debossed tab portion 317 that, like tab 217, forms an “ez-pee” feature on the cover 334 and a graspable portion on the container 332 for users to hold while preparing the food product.

[0043] The multi-item packaged food products disclosed in the various embodiments herein may provide various advantages over traditional packaging. For example, the package structure enables users to microwave food products such as sausage, etc. in the package without removing the food product from the package prior to heating. The package structure also enables users to “break off” one or more individual packages containing a desired portion from the remainder of the unused packages/food products. Additionally, the integrated “drip tray” provides a means for collecting grease, oils, etc., away from the food product during preparation of the food product. Furthermore, the form and shape of the container and top may suggest to the user the removal direction for the top, including removal of the top from individual or multiple packages. Further yet, the integrated grip and/or handle portions provide users a secure grasp of individual packages (e.g., to assist in separating individual packages, opening of packages, etc.).

[0044] It is important to note that the construction and arrangement of the elements of the packaged food products and/or methods as shown in the exemplary embodiments are illustrative only. Although a few embodiments have been described in detail in this disclosure, those skilled in the art who review this disclosure will readily appreciate that many modifications are possible (e.g., variations in sizes, dimensions, structures, shapes and proportions of the various elements, values of parameters, mounting arrangements, materials, colors, orientations, etc.) without materially departing from the novel teachings and advantages of the subject matter recited in the various embodiments. Accordingly, all such modifications are intended to be included within the scope of the present disclosure as defined in the appended claims. The order or sequence of any process or method steps may be varied or re-sequenced according to alternative embodiments. Other substitutions, modifications, changes, and/or omissions may be made in the design, operating conditions, and arrangement of the exemplary embodiments without departing from the spirit of the present disclosure.

What is claimed is:

1. A packaged food product comprising:
   a bottom defining a plurality of containers, each container comprising a bottom wall defining at least one raised portion configured to maintain a space between a food product and a remainder of the bottom wall; and
   a top removably coupled to the bottom, the top defining a plurality of peel starter portions usable to remove at least a portion of the top from the bottom,
   wherein the top and bottom collectively define a plurality of individual packages that are removable relative to one another while the top is removably coupled to the bottom.

2. The packaged food product of claim 1, wherein the bottom and top are configured to be in a folded position such that portions of the top corresponding to at least two of the individual packages face each other.

3. The packaged food product of claim 2, further comprising an outer sleeve extending about at least a portion of the individual packages and configured to maintain the individual packages in the folded position.

4. The packaged food product of claim 1, wherein the bottom comprises an upper lip removably coupled to the top, and at least one debossed tab portion extending downward from the upper lip that is spaced apart from the top when the top is coupled to the upper lip of the bottom.

5. The packaged food product of claim 1, wherein the at least one raised portion is wavy-shaped.

6. The packaged food product of claim 1, wherein the bottom is made of a polymer material using a molding process.

7. The packaged food product of claim 6, wherein the molding process comprises injection molding, blow-injection molding, thermoforming, vacuum forming, blow molding, or sheet molding.

8. A packaged food product comprising:
   a package assembly comprising a bottom portion coupled to a top portion, the bottom and top portions being configured to be folded about a line between containers and maintained in a folded position;
wherein the bottom portion defines a plurality of containers, each container comprising an integrated drip tray formed by at least one embossed portion configured to support a food product above a remainder of a bottom of the container.

9. The packaged food product of claim 8, wherein the top portion defines a plurality of peel starter portions usable to remove at least a portion of the top from the bottom;

10. The product of claim 8, further comprising an outer sleeve extending about at least a portion of the package assembly and configured to maintain the package assembly in the folded position.

11. The packaged food product of claim 8, wherein the bottom portion comprises an upper lip coupled to the top portion, and at least one debossed tab portion extending downward from the upper lip that is spaced apart from the top portion when the top portion is coupled to the upper lip of the bottom portion.

12. The packaged food product of claim 8, wherein the at least one embossed portion is wavy-shaped.

13. The packaged food product of claim 8, wherein the bottom portion is made of a polymer material using a molding process.

14. The packaged food product of claim 13, wherein the molding process comprises injection molding, blow-injection molding, thermoforming, vacuum forming, blow molding, or sheet molding.

15. The packaged food product of claim 8, wherein at least a portion of the bottom portions is transparent.

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