

COATED STABILISED MICROWAVE HEATED FOODS

This invention relates to food products which can be cooked or reheated using a microwave oven. The invention relates particularly but not exclusively to foodstuffs comprising a core and a coating surrounding the core, for example a battered or breaded product. The invention also relates to non-coated food products and to ingredients for food products. This invention also includes products which may be cooked or reheated in a conventional thermal oven, grill or shallow or deep fried.

Many food materials, for example natural muscle of poultry, fish or red meat or vegetable or processed foods contain a large percentage of water. Most fresh foods contain more than 60% water. Some of this water is bound, that is tightly attached to the constituent cells. The remaining mobile water is available and can be frozen. If a food product is frozen to a core temperature of between -1°C and -30°C or lower and is placed and irradiated in a microwave oven, the microwave energy will be primarily absorbed by the frozen available water. Whereas in conventional cooking heat is applied from the exterior, in microwave cooking heat is generated from within. The process of heating can be very rapid so that available water is converted into steam. When a food product is allowed to stand after heating in a microwave oven, water can continue to be expelled from the product. This is particularly noticeable for example when heating frozen fish muscle. The loss of water causes any food coating, particularly a batter, pastry or breadcrumb coating to become soggy and unpalatable. In addition the core of the substrate may become dry due to the loss of water.

Attempts have been made to limit the escape of moisture during microwave cooking by coating the product with a composition which forms an impermeable film. This is unsatisfactory because the natural distribution of water within the coated product is lost through any coating as steam and due to internal pressure. Furthermore an impenetrable coating or film is detrimental to the taste and mouth feel of the product.

WO97/03572 discloses a method of stabilising a microwave cookable or reheatable food material by impregnation of the product with a stabiliser composition comprising cellulose gum, modified starch, polydextrose, xanthan gum, egg albumen and pea starch.

According to a first aspect of the present invention there is provided a method of manufacture of a microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product wherein the

product comprises a substrate comprising pieces of poultry, red meat, fish or vegetable, fruit or, dairy foods; the method comprising the steps of a mixture comprising:

applying a first coating of an aqueous coating to the substrate;

wherein the aqueous coating comprises water and about 0.1 to about 5% by dry weight

of:

cellulose gum	15-35%
modified starch	15-50%
hydrocolloid	20-30%
proteinaceous component	10-20%

wherein the percentages of the ingredients are selected from the ranges quoted to total 100%; and

optional further ingredients;

applying a first crumb coating of fine crumb to the aqueous coating to form a layer of fine crumb encasing the substrate;

applying a batter composition to the first crumb coating to form a batter coating;

and optionally applying a second crumb coating of outer crumb to the batter coating.

The amount of modified starch in the stabiliser composition is preferably from about 15% to about 40%, more preferably from about 15% to about 40%, more preferably from about 15% to about 35%.

The method of the present invention confers the advantage that coating of pieces of meat, poultry or fish with a pre-dust before applying a batter composition is avoided. Use of a pre-dust has the disadvantage that the pre-dust powder is transferred to the batter composition during the course of a manufacturing process leading to an increase in viscosity and a change in the chemical composition of the batter. Also, the pre-dust can become airborne leading to contamination of adjacent equipment and a potential hazard. This is particularly disadvantageous in large scale industrial production. The invention finds particular application in commercial scale production of food products, for example, having a throughput of more than 50kg/hr, for example more than 100 kg/hr, preferably more than 500 kg/hr.

The protein containing component may comprise ingredients selected from the group consisting of: egg albumen, protein isolate and mixtures thereof. A suitable protein isolate is soya protein isolate. Use of egg albumen is preferred.

Preferably the substrate is impregnated with a stabiliser composition before coating with the aqueous coating solution. Use of a stabiliser is especially preferred for microwave cookable or reheatable products.

5 For thermally cookable or reheatable food products the step of impregnation of the substrate with the stabiliser may be omitted.

The stabiliser may comprise a stabiliser composition as described below or may be as disclosed in WO97/03572, particularly Examples 8 or 9.

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In a preferred aspect of the invention the stabiliser composition comprises an aqueous solution of:

	cellulose gum	5-25%
	modified starch	16-50%
15	thickener component	32-79%

wherein the percentages of the ingredients are by dry weight and are selected from the ranges quoted to total 100%.

20 The amount of modified starch in the stabiliser composition is preferably from about 16% to about 45%, more preferably from about 16% to about 40%, especially from about 16% to about 35% by dry weight.

Preferably the thickener component comprises as percentages of the stabiliser composition by dry weight:

	polydextrose	30-55%
25	proteinaceous component	1-20%
	hydrocolloid	1-10%

30 The proteinaceous component may comprise ingredients selected from the group consisting of: egg albumen, whey protein, protein isolate and mixtures thereof. A suitable protein isolate is soya protein isolate. Use of egg albumen is preferred.

Suitable hydrocolloids may be selected from the group consisting of xanthan gum, carageenan gum, guar gum and mixtures thereof. Use of xanthan gum, guar gum or mixtures thereof is particularly preferred. Use of xanthan gum or a mixture of hydrocolloids containing

xanthan gum is especially preferred. An amount of about 3% to about 10%, particularly about 6% is preferred.

The cellulose gum and modified starch may be considered to act as a thermal gelation component. The thickener component may serve as a binder. Without wishing to be bound by theory it is believed that the gelation component may serve to form a thermal gel during heating preventing loss of water from the substrate. The thickener component may serve as a thickener and binder and may also serve as a cryoprotectant so that the overall stabiliser composition retains water in the substrate matrix during cooking or reheating in a microwave oven and so that the product has improved storage properties when frozen.

In a preferred embodiment the stabiliser composition comprises an aqueous solution of:

cellulose gum	5-25%
modified starch	16-35%
polydextrose	30-55%
hydrocolloid	1-10%
egg albumen	1-20%

wherein the percentages of the ingredients are by dry weight and are selected from the ranges quoted to total 100%.

A particularly preferred stabiliser composition comprises:

cellulose gum	10-20%
modified starch	20-30%
polydextrose	35-45%
hydrocolloid	3-10%
egg albumen	3-18%

The preferred hydrocolloid is xanthan gum or a mixture of hydrocolloids containing xanthan gum.

An especially preferred stabiliser composition comprises:

cellulose gum	15%
modified starch	24%
polydextrose	40%
xanthan gum	6%

egg albumen	15%
Total	100%

5 Preferably the aqueous coating composition comprises water and 0.1 to 5% by dry weight of:

cellulose gum	15-35%
modified starch	15-35%
hydrocolloid	20-30%
egg albumen	10-20%

10 wherein the percentages of the ingredients are by dry weight and are selected from the ranges quoted to total 100%.

15 The aqueous coating may be a viscous aqueous solution, may be thixotropic, or may be a gel which forms a solid or semi-solid consistency when not subjected to shear. The aqueous coating is preferably a free flowing viscous fluid or gel and may be referred in this specification as a "gel" or "aqueous coating" for convenience.

20 The preferred hydrocolloid in the aqueous coating composition is xanthan gum or a mixture of hydrocolloids containing xanthan gum.

The aqueous coating composition is preferably dissolved or dispersed in water to form a viscous solution or gel with a solids content of about 0.1% to 5%, preferably about 0.3% to 3%, more preferably about 1%.

25 The aqueous stabiliser is preferably dissolved or dispersed in water to give a solution with a solids content of about 0.1% to about 20%, preferably 1% to about 8%, more preferably about 3% to about 5%.

30 Preferred cellulose gums may be selected from the group consisting of: methyl cellulose, hydroxypropyl methyl cellulose and carboxymethyl cellulose. Methyl cellulose or cellulose ethers particularly as sold under the trade mark METHOCEL A4M is especially preferred. An amount of about 10%, preferably about 15% is particularly preferred.

Preferred modified starches comprise partially degraded starch which has been modified for example by heating or acetylation. Hydroxyalkylated starch for example hydroxypropylated starch may be employed. A suitable modified starch is manufactured under the trade mark THERMFLO. An amount of about 20% to about 30%, preferably about 24% is preferred.

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Suitable hydrocolloids for use in the gel composition may be selected from the group consisting of: xanthan gum, carageenan gum, guar gum and mixtures thereof. Use of xanthan gum, guar gum or mixtures thereof is particularly preferred. Use of xanthan gum or a mixture of hydrocolloids containing xanthan gum is especially preferred. An amount of about 5%, particularly about 6% is preferred.

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Polydextrose as employed in this invention is available under the trade mark LITESSE. An amount of about 30% to about 55%, preferably about 55% to about 45% more preferably about 40% may be used.

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In a preferred embodiment the stabiliser composition contains polydextrose and the coating composition does not contain any or a substantial amount of polydextrose.

The proteinaceous component may comprise ingredients selected from the group consisting of: egg albumen, whey protein, protein isolate and mixtures thereof. A suitable protein isolate is soya protein isolate. Use of egg albumen is preferred.

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Further ingredients may be used as necessary. For example flavourings, preservatives or colourants may be added.

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Preferred stabiliser or aqueous coating compositions do not contain substantial amounts of other starches. In particularly preferred embodiments one or both of the stabiliser and aqueous coating compositions consist essentially of the disclosed ingredients, that, is no further ingredients are present in sufficient amounts to alter the essential properties of the composition. More preferably there are no further ingredients in the stabiliser and aqueous coating compositions.

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According to a second aspect of this invention a microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product comprises a substrate comprising pieces of poultry, fish, red meat, vegetable, dairy or processed foods;

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a coating of an aqueous coating applied to the substrate;

wherein the aqueous coating comprises water and 0.1 to 5% by dry weight of:

	cellulose gum	15-35%
	modified starch	15-35%
5	hydrocolloid	20-30%
	proteinaceous component	10-20%

a first coating of fine crumb applied to the aqueous solution coating to form a layer of fine crumb encasing the substrate;

10 a batter composition applied to the first coating to form a batter coating;
an optional layer of outer crumb applied to the batter coating.

The proteinaceous component may comprise ingredients selected from the group consisting of: egg albumen, whey protein, protein isolate and mixtures thereof. A suitable protein isolate is soya protein isolate. Use of egg albumen is preferred.

Preferably the substrate is impregnated with a stabiliser composition before coating with the aqueous coating. Use of a stabiliser is especially preferred for microwaveable products.

20 For thermally cookable or reheatable food products the step of impregnation of the substrate with the stabiliser may be omitted.

The stabiliser may comprise a composition as described above with reference to the first and second aspects of the invention or may be as disclosed in WO97/03572.

25 Preferably the aqueous coating comprises water and 0.1 – 5% by dry weight of:

	cellulose gum	15-35%
	modified starch	15-35%
	hydrocolloid	20-30%
30	egg albumen	10-20%

A particularly preferred aqueous coating composition comprises:

	cellulose gum	20-30%
	modified starch	20-40%
35	hydrocolloid	20-40%

egg albumen	10-30%
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An especially preferred aqueous coating composition comprises:

5	cellulose gum	25%
	modified starch	35%
	xanthan gum	25%
	egg albumen	15%
	Total	100%

10 In a particularly preferred embodiments of the invention a first coating of fine crumb is applied to the aqueous coating solution.

Advantageously the fine crumb has a particle size of about 0.1 to about 1mm, preferably
15 about 0.25 to about 0.9mm. Smaller particles for example crumb dust may be used. A 1mm mesh sieve may be used to screen larger particles from the fines. The fine crumb may comprise fines resultant from milling during manufacture of crumb used for the exterior coating of a food product.

20 Untreated fines may be used, for example pin head rusk. However use of pin head rusk may not be preferred for certain applications due to a tendency to form a moist or slimy coating caused by picking up of water from contact with the aqueous coating or gel or from a batter composition applied to the fine crumb layer.

25 Preferably crumb fines incorporating a hydrocolloid may be employed. The hydrocolloid may be selected from guar gum, xanthan gum or mixtures thereof. Use of a hydrocolloid may provide a degree of water resistance to the fines reducing any tendency to pick up moisture from adjacent gel or batter layers. Use of fines resulting from the process for manufacture of crumb as disclosed in WO 2010/001101 is especially preferred.

30 Application of a first coating of crumb fines may be difficult without use of an aqueous coating or gel applied as a pre-coat as disclosed above since the fines will not adhere sufficiently to a dry substrate such as a conventional pre-dust. Use of the aqueous coating or gel coating has the additional advantage that the fines layer may adhere to the substrate providing a complete
35 covering or shell surrounding the stabilised substrate to reduce the escape of water vapour or

ingress of fat during frying. Application of the aqueous coating or gel allows formation of a complete coating on the substrate allowing adhesion of the first fine crumb to the entire surface forming an integral shell of the fine crumb.

5 The first crumb coating may be applied using a first crumb applicator, the crumb being applied in excess with the surplus being shaken off.

A loading of the crumb layer may be about 5-10% of the weight of the stabilised substrate, dependent on the size of the substrate particles and other factors.

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Following application of the first crumb, a coating of batter may be applied by immersion using a tempura applicator or other convenient apparatus. Following application of the batter layer a second outer crumb coating may be applied. Preferably two outer coatings of crumb are applied, the first coating being of larger particles followed by a further coating of smaller particles to fill any gaps between the larger particles.

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In a preferred embodiment the first outer crumb coating comprises particles having a size of 1-3mm preferably about 2mm or larger as appropriate. The crumb may be applied in excess using a crumb applicator with surplus shaken off. The crumb coated substrate may be passed through a roller to improve adhesion.

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A second outer coating of smaller particles of crumb for example having a size from about 0.2 to about 2mm and preferably about 0.5 to about 1mm may be applied dependent on the size of the substrate and the dimensions of the first outer crumb. Use of two crumb layers forms an integral coating without the batter layer being visible. A roller may be used to improve adhesion of the second crumb coating.

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This invention also provides a dry composition for hydration to form a stabiliser or an aqueous coating in accordance with previous aspects of this invention.

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A method of stabilisation and stabiliser compositions in accordance with this invention may be used for coated products such as crumbed or pastry enrobed products. In addition the composition may be used for uncoated products including cooked meat, for example sausages and fish. Vegetables and fruit may also be stabilised.

The method may include the step of applying a second or further batter coating to the impregnated coated substrate.

5 A batter coating may be applied to the substrate. A suitable batter coating is disclosed in our UK patent application No 1000647.6 filed 15 January 2010, the disclosure of which is incorporated into the specification by reference for all purposes. Alternatively a coating as disclosed in WO96/32026 may be used.

10 A crumb coating may be applied to the batter coating. A preferred crumb coating is disclosed in WO 2010/001101, the disclosure of which is incorporated in to the present specification for all purposes by reference.

15 The battered and/or crumb coated product may be fried and then frozen for storage prior to use.

 The coated product, whether frozen, chilled or fresh, may be reheated or cooked before use using an oven selected from: a microwave oven, a conventional oven or grill, shallow or deep fry, or an oven using a combination of microwave and conventional heating.

20 The pieces of the substrate may be whole portions, for example whole muscle portions such as individual steaks or fillets or larger pieces which may be cut into individual portions after cooking or reheating. Alternatively the pieces may comprise chopped or comminuted pieces, for example, nuggets or minced products which may be reformulated into larger portions.

25 The substrate may be impregnated with the stabiliser composition by vacuum impregnation, soaking or injection.

 Stabiliser compositions in accordance with this invention can confer several advantages. Application of a predust is avoided, preventing problems arising from dispersion of dust in the manufacturing environment. Furthermore the transmission of dust into a batter composition used in a subsequent coating step is avoided, preventing an increase in viscosity of the batter during use. The aqueous coating or gel coating exhibits good adhesion to the impregnated substrate. Adhesion of subsequently applied crumb or other fine particles is facilitated. The aqueous coating or gel coating also serves as an additional barrier to loss of moisture from the substrate

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during the subsequent microwave heating stage. Without wishing to be bound by theory it is believed that the gel coating composition adsorbs moisture escaping from the core and also serves as a barrier to fat pickup by the core, avoiding impairment of the flavour of the core. Impregnation of the core with an aqueous solution of the stabiliser contributes to the moisture content of the core during cooking or reheating.

Amounts and percentages referred to in this specification are by weight unless indicated otherwise and are selected from any ranges quoted to total 100%.

The invention is further described by means of example but not in any limitative sense.

Example 1 Stabiliser Composition

A stabiliser composition was prepared using the following ingredients:-

Ingredient	%
cellulose gum (Methocel A4M)	15.0
modified starch (Thermflo)	24.0
polydextrose	40.0
xanthan gum	6.0
egg albumen	15.0
Total	100.0

Example 2 General-Purpose Stabiliser Composition

A composition of the following ingredients was used to form a viscous fluid coating composition

Methylcellulose	15%
modified starch (Thermflo)	24%
egg albumen	15%
xanthan gum	6%
polydextrose	40%
	100%

The composition was dissolved in water to produce a solution with a concentration suitable to stabilise the particular substrate in use. This general purpose formula may be modified to increase its efficiency in specific substrates. The above formula may be modified by

addition of citric acid (up to 1%) and ascorbic acid (up to 2%) with the polydextrose (Litesse II (Trade Mark)) being reduced accordingly.

Example 3 – Preparation of Stabiliser Composition

5 The dry powder mixture was partially hydrated in a tub and then poured into a bowl chopper. The bowl chopper was then run for two to three minutes until fully hydrated. The mixture can be hydrated directly in the bowl chopper if required. Alternatively, the stabiliser may be hydrated using a high shear mixer fitted with a general purpose head.

Example 4 - Impregnation of the Substrate with the Stabiliser Composition

10 A chicken mixture for chicken dippers or nuggets was prepared with the following composition which was prepared as a dry mixture, as an alternative to use of a hydrated stabiliser composition. The stabiliser of Example 1 was used.

	chicken emulsion	20%
15	skin – 3mm	18%
	chicken breast – 10mm	50%
	water	2%
	rusk	2%
	stabiliser (Example 1)	5%
20	seasoning	3%
		100%

25 The chicken breast was chilled to -3°C and minced using a 10mm plate. After mincing, the temperature was 0-3°C. Water was added with mixing. A chicken emulsion comprising the following ingredients was added with mixing:

	chicken skin	44%
	water	44%
	soya isolate	11%
	salt	1%
		100%

The stabiliser in accordance to Example 1 was added and mixed thoroughly. Rusk was added with mixing following by seasoning. A dry powder flavouring was preferred. The

composition was allowed to dissolve in use in water which was present in the substrate in order to form an aqueous stabiliser solution in situ.

5 A vacuum was applied to the mixture to consolidate the structure following which the chicken mixture was chilled to -3°C and formed into shaped pieces.

A similar procedure was used for other comminuted meat products. Large particulate cores may be manufactured using a similar method.

10 Example 5 – Impregnation of a Chicken Mixture with the Stabiliser Composition

chicken breast meat (13mm)	79%
salt	1%
water	12%
stabiliser (Example 1)	5%
15 inuline and seasoning	3%
	100%

Example 6 – Impregnation of a Fish Mixture with a Stabiliser Composition

cod fillet blocks (partially thawed)	85.8%
20 salt	0.9%
water	4.6%
stabiliser (Example 1)	4.8%
fish binder	3.9%
	100%

25 Example 7 Batter Coating Composition

A batter coating composition was prepared by mixing the following ingredients:

Ingredient	%
soya flour (Hisoy)	29.0
high amylase starch (Hylon 7)	28.8
maize flour	19.2
whole egg (Henningsen W1)	14.0
glyceryl monostearate	02.0
D-xylose	02.0

monosodium phosphate	1.90
guar gum	1.0
ammonium bicarbonate	0.7
glucono-D-lactone	0.7
sodium acid pyrophosphate	0.4
thickener (Methocel A4M)	0.2
alpha amylase	0.1
	100%

30 The batter can be mixed in batches using a Silverson DX high shear mixer on a gantry with a slotted disintegrating head. Batches were mixed in the ratio of 25 kilos water to 12.5 kilos dry batter powder in a vat with a diameter of 68 cm. Thereafter, the mix was diluted as required for example to give a ratio of water: powder of 2.4:1.

35 In full scale production the batter ingredients were mixed in a ratio of water: powder of 2.4:1 using two 200 litre stainless steel vessels linked by a pump and an inline Silverson mixer with a high shear slotted disintegrating head. One tank was fitted with a paddle and was filled with water at 15-20°C. The dry ingredients were added to the water and wetted by rotation of the paddle. The second tank was fitted with a cooling jacket and a return pipe to the first vessel. The batter mixture was circulated through the high shear head until a temperature of 42°C was
40 reached by mechanical heat transfer. The start temperature of the water may be increased to reduce mixing time. When 42°C was reached, the mixing and enzymolysis were complete. The batter was transferred to the second vessel and cooled. A heat exchanger may be used to cool the mixture. After cooling, the batter was pumped into a tempura type batter applicator.

45 The viscosity in the batter mixture was in the range 550 – 650 cP as measured by a number 3 spindle at 60rpm. The batter was found to give a good rate of pickup and a crisp coating after frying.

Example 8 Aqueous Coating Composition

50 The following mixture was prepared:

modified starch (Thermflo)	35%	
thickener (Methocel A4M)	25%	
xanthan gum	25%	
egg albumen	15%	5
	100%	

The mixture was dissolved in water to form a 1% solution using a CFS Scanbrine mixer with paddle agitation. The solution was left to stand for 24 hours to form a fully hydrated gel or viscous aqueous solution

The aqueous coating was applied to impregnated substrates of Examples 4 to 7 using a tempura type batter applicator in which the substrate particles were dipped.

A pump is necessary to run the machine but after a short while bubbles form in the solution or gel in the applicator. To prevent this problem food grade anti foaming agents can be used. Polydimethylsiloxane is preferred but calcium alginate, methyl ethyl cellulose, methylphenylpolysiloxane or polyethylene glycol can be used.

Example 9 Crumb Application

A crumb was prepared as disclosed in WO 2010/001101, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference for all purposes.

Following application of the aqueous coating as described in Example 8, a fine crumb was applied with a mesh size less than 1mm or such as may be described as a dust, using a CFS Crumbmaster breadcrumb applicator.

The fine crumb coated impregnated substrate was passed through the batter of Example 7 in a tempura batter applicator.

A 2mm crumb was applied in a second CFS Crumbmaster breadcrumb applicator with slight pressure from a roller. Particles were passed through a third CFS Crumbmaster breadcrumb applicator to infill with a 1mm crumb using light pressure from a roller.

Example 10 Frying and cooking

5 The coated substrate of Example 9 was fried in pure, fresh rapeseed oil for 2 minutes 20 seconds approximately at 180-188°C. The frying time can be varied depending upon the weight and size of the particles. After frying, the core temperature was 74 - 85°C. A small loss of weight was observed due to loss of water from the substrate but this is mostly compensated for by the uptake of oil.

CLAIMS

1. A method of manufacture of a microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product
5 wherein the product comprises a substrate comprising pieces of poultry, fish, red meat, vegetable, fruit or dairy food; the method comprising the steps of:

applying a coating of an aqueous coating composition to the substrate;

wherein the aqueous coating composition comprises water and 0.1 to 5% of a mixture comprising by dry weight:

10	cellulose gum	15-35%
	modified starch	15-50%
	hydrocolloid	20-30%
	proteinaceous component	10-20%

15 wherein the percentages of the ingredients are selected from the ranges quoted to total 100%; and

optional further ingredients;

applying a first coating of fine crumb to the aqueous coating to form a layer of fine crumb encasing the substrate;

20 applying a batter composition to the first coating to form a batter coating;
and optionally applying a layer of outer crumb to the batter coating.

2. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 1, wherein the amount of modified starch in the coating composition is 15 to 35% by dry weight.

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3. A method of manufacture of a food product claimed in claim 1 or 2, wherein the substrate is impregnated with a stabiliser composition before coating with the aqueous coating composition.

30 4. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in any preceding claim; wherein the proteinaceous component is selected from the group consisting of: egg albumen, whey protein, protein isolate and mixtures thereof.

5. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 4; wherein the
35 proteinaceous component is egg albumen.

6. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in any preceding claim wherein the hydrocolloid is selected from the group consisting of: xanthan gum, carageenan gum, guar gum and mixtures thereof.

7. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 6; wherein the hydrocolloid is selected from the group consisting of: xanthan gum, guar gum and mixtures thereof.

8. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 7; wherein the hydrocolloid comprises xanthan gum or a mixture of hydrocolloids including xanthan gum.

9. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in any of claims 3-8, wherein the stabiliser composition comprises as percentages of dry weight of the stabiliser composition:

cellulose gum	5-25%
modified starch	16-50%
thickener composition	32-79%

10. A method as claimed in claim 9, wherein the amount of modified starch in the stabiliser composition is 16 to 35% by dry weight.

11. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 9, wherein the thickener composition comprises as a percentage by dry weight of the stabiliser composition:

polydextrose	30-55%
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12. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 9 or 11 wherein the thickener composition comprises as a percentage by dry weight of the stabiliser composition:

proteinaceous component	1-20%
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13. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in any of claims 9-12; wherein the thickener comprises as a percentage by dry weight of the stabiliser composition:

hydrocolloid	1-10%
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14. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 9, wherein the thickener component comprises as a percentage by dry weight of the stabiliser composition:

polydextrose	15-35%
proteinaceous component	1-20%
hydrocolloid	1-10%

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15. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 9, wherein the stabiliser comprises an aqueous solution of a mixture comprising by dry weight:

cellulose gum	5-25%
modified starch	16-35%
polydextrose	30-55%
hydrocolloid	1-10%
egg albumen	1-20%

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16. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 15 wherein the stabiliser composition comprises by dry weight of the stabiliser composition:

cellulose gum	10-20%
modified starch	20-30%
polydextrose	35-45%
hydrocolloid	3-10%
egg albumen	3-18%

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17. A method of manufacture of a food product as claimed in claim 16 wherein the stabiliser composition comprises by dry weight:

cellulose gum	15%
modified starch	24%
polydextrose	40%
xanthan gum	6%
egg albumen	15%
Total	100%

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18. A microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product comprising a substrate comprising pieces of meat, poultry, fish, vegetable, fruit or dairy food, said substrate being coated with an aqueous coating composition as recited in any of claims 1 to 17.

19. A microwave cookable or reheatable food product as claimed in claim 18, wherein the substrate is impregnated with a stabiliser composition as recited in any one of claims 2 to 17.

20. A method or food product as claimed in any preceding claim, wherein the aqueous coating composition has a solids content of about 0.3% to about 3%.

21. A method or food product as claimed in claim 20, wherein the aqueous coating composition has a solids content of about 1%.

22. A microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product as claimed in claim 18 to 21, wherein the food product further comprises:

a coating of fine crumb applied to the coating of the coating composition to form a layer of fine crumb encasing the substrate;

a batter composition applied to the layer of fine crumb to form a batter coating;

and

an optional layer of outer crumb applied to the batter coating.

23. A microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product as claimed in claim 22; wherein the fine crumb incorporates a hydrocolloid, preferably selected from the group consisting of: xanthan gum, carageenan gum, guar gum and mixtures thereof.

24. A microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product as claimed in claim 23, wherein the hydrocolloid comprises xanthan gum or a mixture of hydrocolloids including xanthan gum.

25. A microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product as claimed in any of claims 18-24, wherein the food product is obtained by a method as claimed in any one of claims 1-17.

26. A microwave or thermally cookable or reheatable food product as claimed in any of claims 18 to 25, wherein the fine crumb has a particle size of about 0.25 to about 1 mm.

27. A method or food product as claimed in any of claims 3 to 26, wherein the aqueous stabiliser composition has a solids content of 0.1 to 20%, preferably of 1 to 8%, more preferably of 3 to 5%.

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28. A packaged product comprising dry compositions consisting of ingredients for hydration to form a stabiliser composition and an aqueous coating composition for use in a method as claimed in any of claims 2 to 17.