

WAFER PROCESSING METHOD

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a wafer processing method for use in grinding a wafer having asperities formed on the front side.

Description of the Related Art

There is an increasing chance of thinning a wafer before dividing the wafer into device chips, so as to reduce the size and weight of each device chip adapted to be incorporated into various electronic equipment or the like. For example, the wafer can be thinned by holding the front side of the wafer on which devices are formed on a chuck table, rotating a grinding wheel, and pressing the grinding wheel against the back side of the wafer to thereby grind the back side of the wafer.

In grinding the wafer by using the above method, a protective member is usually attached to the front side of the wafer (see Japanese Patent Laid-Open No. Hei 10-50642, for example). The protective member can prevent the possibility that the devices formed on the front side of the wafer may be damaged by a force applied to the wafer in grinding the wafer. Examples of the protective

member include an adhesive tape formed of resin and a substrate having high hardness.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In many cases, asperities such as bumps functioning as electrodes on each device are formed on the front side of the wafer. However, when such asperities are present on the front side of the wafer, there arises a problem such that a height difference due to the asperities cannot be sufficiently absorbed by an adhesive tape and the shape corresponding to each asperity may appear on the back side of the wafer after grinding.

By using a substrate having high hardness as the protective member, the above problem can be almost eliminated. However, this substrate is bonded to the wafer by using an adhesive such as a thermoplastic wax. Accordingly, in peeling the substrate from the wafer after grinding, it is necessary to conduct any extensive work dedicated to peeling, such as immersion of the wafer in a solution or heating of the wafer at high temperatures.

It is therefore an object of the present invention to provide a wafer processing method which can sufficiently suppress the influence of the asperities

present on the front side of the wafer in grinding the back side of the wafer and can simply perform a peeling operation after grinding.

In accordance with an aspect of the present invention, there is provided a wafer processing method including a liquid supplying step of supplying a liquid to the front side of a wafer on which a central device area and a peripheral marginal area surrounding the device area are formed, a plurality of devices each having asperities being formed in the device area; a close contact making step of pressing a protective film against the front side of the wafer with the liquid interposed therebetween after performing the liquid supplying step, thereby bringing the protective film into close contact with the front side of the wafer so as to follow the asperities of each device formed on the front side of the wafer; a protective member fixing step of covering the protective film with a protective member formed from a liquid resin curable by external stimulus after performing the close contact making step, thereby fixing the protective member through the protective film to the front side of the wafer; a grinding step of holding the protective member fixed to the wafer on a holding surface of a chuck table in the condition where

the back side of the wafer is exposed after performing the protective member fixing step, and next grinding the back side of the wafer to thereby reduce the thickness of the wafer; and a peeling step of peeling the protective film and the protective member from the wafer after performing the grinding step.

Preferably, the peeling step includes the step of heating the liquid left between the protective film and the front side of the wafer to thereby vaporize the liquid.

Preferably, the peeling step includes the steps of loading the wafer with the protective member into a vacuum chamber and next evacuating the vacuum chamber to thereby vaporize the liquid left between the protective film and the front side of the wafer.

Preferably, the liquid supplying step includes the step of supplying the liquid to a central portion of the front side of the wafer.

Preferably, the protective film has a first surface and a second surface opposite to the first surface, the first surface being opposed to the wafer; the close contact making step including the step of discharging a gas toward the second surface of the protective film to thereby press the protective film against the front side

of the wafer.

Preferably, the close contact making step includes the step of using a pressure roller to thereby press the protective film against the front side of the wafer.

Preferably, the protective member fixing step includes the steps of applying the liquid resin to a flat sheet, next pressing the wafer against the liquid resin through the protective film to thereby fully cover the protective film with the liquid resin, and next applying the external stimulus to the liquid resin to thereby cure the liquid resin, thereby forming the protective member from the liquid resin and fixing the protective member to the wafer.

In the wafer processing method according to the present invention, the protective film is first brought into close contact with the front side of the wafer on which the devices each having asperities are formed in such a manner as to follow the asperities. Thereafter, the protective film is covered with the protective member formed from the liquid resin curable by external stimulus, thereby fixing the protective member through the protective film to the front side of the wafer. Accordingly, by forming the protective member having a suitable thickness, the asperities formed on the front

side of the wafer can be sufficiently absorbed.

In the wafer processing method according to the present invention, the protective film is not bonded to the device area of the wafer, but is merely in close contact with the device area. Accordingly, the protective member and the protective film can be simply peeled from the wafer without the need for any extensive work dedicated to peeling, such as immersion of the wafer in a solution or heating of the wafer at high temperatures. Thus, according to the present invention, it is possible to provide a wafer processing method which can exhibit the effects that the influence of the asperities present on the front side of the wafer can be sufficiently suppressed in grinding the back side of the wafer and that the peeling operation after grinding can also be simply performed.

Further, in the wafer processing method according to the present invention, the protective film is pressed against the front side of the wafer through the liquid supplied to the front side of the wafer. Accordingly, it is possible to prevent that air may be left between the wafer and the protective film, thereby reliably bringing the protective film into close contact with the front side of the wafer. As a result, although the protective

film does not have adhesion by an adhesive (paste), there is no possibility that the protective film and the protective member may be peeled from the wafer in grinding the wafer.

The above and other objects, features and advantages of the present invention and the manner of realizing them will become more apparent, and the invention itself will best be understood from a study of the following description and appended claims with reference to the attached drawings showing a preferred embodiment of the invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1A is a schematic perspective view showing a manner of opposing a protective film to the front side of a wafer;

FIG. 1B is a schematic perspective view showing a condition where the protective film is in close contact with the front side of the wafer;

FIG. 2A is a schematic sectional view showing a condition where the protective film is opposed to the front side of the wafer in a close contact making step according to a preferred embodiment;

FIG. 2B is a schematic sectional view showing a

manner of bringing the protective film into close contact with the front side of the wafer in the close contact making step;

FIG. 3A is a schematic sectional view showing a condition where the protective film has been brought into close contact with the front side of the wafer;

FIG. 3B is an enlarged sectional view of a part of the wafer in the condition where the protective film is in close contact with the front side of the wafer;

FIG. 4A is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of pressing the wafer through the protective film against a liquid resin applied to a sheet in a protective member fixing step according to this preferred embodiment;

FIG. 4B is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of curing the liquid resin to thereby form a protective member, thereby fixing the protective member through the protective film to the front side of the wafer in the protective member fixing step;

FIG. 4C is a schematic sectional view showing the wafer in the condition where the protective member supported to the sheet is fixed through the protective film to the front side of the wafer;

FIG. 5A is a schematic side view, partially in

cross section, showing a manner of grinding the back side of the wafer in a grinding step according to this preferred embodiment;

FIG. 5B is a schematic sectional view of the wafer processed by the grinding step;

FIG. 6 is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of peeling the protective film and the protective member from the wafer in a peeling step according to this preferred embodiment;

FIG. 7 is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of peeling the protective film and the protective member from the wafer in a peeling step according to a first modification;

FIG. 8 is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of peeling the protective film and the protective member from the wafer in a peeling step according to a second modification; and

FIGS. 9A and 9B are schematic sectional views for illustrating a close contact making step according to a third modification.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

A preferred embodiment of the present invention will now be described with reference to the attached

drawings. The wafer processing method according to this preferred embodiment includes a liquid supplying step, a close contact making step (see FIGS. 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3A, and 3B), a protective member fixing step (see FIGS. 4A, 4B, and 4C), and a grinding step (see FIGS. 5A and 5B), and a peeling step (see FIG. 6). In the liquid supplying step, a liquid is supplied to the front side of a wafer on which asperities are formed. In the close contact making step, a protective film not having adhesion by an adhesive (paste) is brought into close contact with the front side of the wafer so as to follow the asperities formed on the front side of the wafer. In the protective member fixing step, the protective film is covered with a protective member formed from a liquid resin to thereby fix the protective member through the protective film to the front side of the wafer. In the grinding step, the back side of the wafer is ground in the condition where the protective member fixed through the protective film to the front side of the wafer is held on a holding surface of a chuck table. In the peeling step, the protective member and the protective film are peeled together from the wafer thinned by the grinding step. The wafer processing method according to this preferred embodiment will now be described in more detail.

In the wafer processing method according to this preferred embodiment, the liquid supplying step is first performed to supply a liquid to the front side of a wafer on which asperities are formed. Thereafter, the close contact making step is performed to bring a protective film not having adhesion by an adhesive into close contact with the front side of the wafer so as to follow the asperities formed on the front side of the wafer. In other words, the protective film is pressed against the front side of the wafer with the liquid interposed therebetween, thereby bringing the protective film into close contact with the front side of the wafer. FIG. 1A is a schematic perspective view showing a manner of opposing the protective film to the front side of the wafer, and FIG. 1B is a schematic perspective view showing a condition where the protective film is in close contact with the front side of the wafer. FIG. 2A is a schematic sectional view showing a condition where the protective film is opposed to the front side of the wafer, and FIG. 2B is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of bringing the protective film into close contact with the front side of the wafer. FIG. 3A is a schematic sectional view showing a condition where the protective film has been brought into close contact with the front

side of the wafer, and FIG. 3B is an enlarged sectional view of a part of the wafer in the condition where the protective film is in close contact with the front side of the wafer. In FIGS. 2A, 2B, and 3A, a part of the components is shown by functional blocks.

Referring to FIG. 1A, a wafer 11 to be used in this preferred embodiment is shown. The wafer 11 is a disk-shaped wafer formed of silicon (Si), for example. The wafer 11 has a front side 11a, a back side 11b, and an outer circumference 11c. The outer circumference 11c is chamfered along the edges both on the front side 11a and on the back side 11b. The front side 11a of the wafer 11 is composed of a central device area 11d and a peripheral marginal area 11e surrounding the device area 11d. The device area 11d is partitioned by a plurality of crossing division lines (streets) 13 to thereby define a plurality of separate regions where a plurality of devices 15 such as ICs (integrated circuits) are individually formed. Further, a plurality of bumps (asperities) 17 functioning as electrodes are provided on the front side of each device 15. Each bump 17 is formed of solder, for example. While the wafer 11 is a disk-shaped wafer formed of silicon, for example, in this preferred embodiment, the wafer 11 is not limited in material, shape, structure,

size, etc. That is, the wafer 11 may be a wafer formed of any other semiconductors, ceramic, resin, metal, etc. Similarly, the devices 15 and the bumps 17 are not limited in kind, number, shape, structure, size, layout, etc. The bumps 17 may be replaced by any structures (asperities) having any other functions. That is, the bumps 17 may not be formed on the front side 11a of the wafer 11, but any other asperities may be formed on the front side 11a of the wafer 11.

In the liquid supplying step, a liquid 23 (see FIG. 2A) is supplied to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. The liquid 23 to be supplied to the wafer 11 is not especially limited in kind, but it is desirable to use a liquid hard to vaporize at room temperature (20°C) and having a boiling point not so high (e.g., 100°C or less). For example, water may be used as the liquid 23. In this preferred embodiment, the liquid 23 is supplied to the center of the front side 11a of the wafer 11. As a modification, the liquid 23 may be supplied to another part of the front side 11a of the wafer 11 (i.e., any part other than the center of the front side 11a) or may be supplied to the whole of the front side 11a of the wafer 11.

After performing the liquid supplying step, the

close contact making step is performed to bring a protective film 21 into close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 with the liquid 23 interposed therebetween. The protective film 21 is a flexible film formed of resin, for example. The protective film 21 is a circular member having a diameter substantially equal to that of the wafer 11. Further, the protective film 21 is not provided with an adhesive. The thickness of the protective film 21 is not especially limited. For example, the thickness of the protective film 21 is preferably set to approximately 30 μm to 150 μm .

The close contact making step may be performed by using a close contact making apparatus 2 shown in FIG. 2A. The close contact making apparatus 2 includes a support table 4 for supporting the wafer 11. The support table 4 has a substantially flat upper surface, which functions as a support surface 4a for supporting the wafer 11. The support surface 4a is provided with a projecting guide portion 4b for positioning the wafer 11 on the support surface 4a. There is provided above the support table 4 a protective film holding unit 6 for holding the protective film 21 under suction and bringing it into close contact with the wafer 11. The protective film holding unit 6 has a substantially flat lower surface, which functions as a

holding surface 6a for holding the protective film 21 under suction. The protective film holding unit 6 is vertically movably supported by a moving mechanism (not shown), so that the protective film holding unit 6 holding the protective film 21 under suction can be moved in a vertical direction by operating this moving mechanism.

A first passage 6b is formed inside the protective film holding unit 6, and one end of the first passage 6b opens to the holding surface 6a in a peripheral area for holding the peripheral portion of the protective film 21. The other end of the first passage 6b is branched into a plurality of portions, more specifically, a first branch portion, a second branch portion, and a third branch portion. A vacuum source 10 is connected through a valve 8 to the first branch portion of the first passage 6b. A compressed air source 14 is connected through a valve 12 to the second branch portion of the first passage 6b. Further, a second passage 6c is also formed inside the protective film holding unit 6, and one end of the second passage 6c opens to the holding surface 6a in a central area for holding the central portion of the protective film 21. The other end of the second passage 6c is also branched into a plurality of portions, more specifically,

a first branch portion and a second branch portion. The first branch portion of the second passage 6c is connected through a valve 16 to the third branch portion of the first passage 6b. The compressed air source 14 is connected through a valve 18 to the second branch portion of the second passage 6c. Further, a heater 20 for heating the holding surface 6a is provided inside the protective film holding unit 6.

In the close contact making step, the wafer 11 is first placed on the support table 4 in the condition where the back side 11b of the wafer 11 is in contact with the support surface 4a of the support table 4 as shown in FIG. 2A. Accordingly, the wafer 11 is supported on the support table 4 in the condition where the front side 11a of the wafer 11 is exposed upward. Thereafter, the protective film 21 is brought into contact with the holding surface 6a of the protective film holding unit 6 so as to be aligned with the wafer 11. More specifically, the outer circumference of the protective film 21 is positioned directly above the outer circumference 11c of the wafer 11. In this condition, the valves 8 and 16 are opened to apply a vacuum generated from the vacuum source 10 to the protective film 21. Accordingly, the protective film 21 is held on the holding surface 6a of the

protective film holding unit 6 under suction so as to be opposed to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. Before opening the valves 8 and 16, the valves 12 and 18 are closed to stop the supply of compressed air (gas) from the compressed air source 14 to the first passage 6b and the second passage 6c. The vertical position of the protective film holding unit 6 is adjusted so that the spacing between the front side 11a of the wafer 11 and the protective film 21 becomes approximately 0.1 to 10 mm, for example.

After opposing the protective film 21 to the front side 11a of the wafer 11, the holding surface 6a is heated by the heater 20 to thereby apply heat to the protective film 21, thereby softening the protective film 21. Thereafter, as shown in FIG. 2B, the valve 16 is closed to cut off the vacuum from the vacuum source 10 to the second passage 6c, and the valve 18 is next opened to supply the compressed air from the compressed air source 14 to the second passage 6c. Accordingly, the compressed air is discharged toward the central portion of the upper surface of the protective film 21, in which the central portion of the upper surface of the protective film 21 is merely in contact with the holding surface 6a at this time (the upper surface of the protective film 21

corresponds to the second surface opposite to the first surface of the protective film 21 opposed to the wafer 11). As a result, the central portion of the protective film 21 is swelled downward and pressed against the front side 11a of the wafer 11 as shown in FIG. 2B. In this preferred embodiment, the liquid 23 is previously supplied to the central portion of the front side 11a of the wafer 11 in the liquid supplying step as mentioned above, so that the protective film 21 is pressed against the front side 11a of the wafer 11 with a film of the liquid 23 interposed therebetween.

Thereafter, the discharge of the compressed air toward the protective film 21 is continued, so that the protective film 21 is pressed against the front side 11a of the wafer 11 in a radially outward direction starting from the center of the wafer 11. After pressing the protective film 21 against the front side 11a of the wafer 11 in the whole area except the peripheral area yet held under suction, the valve 8 is closed to cut off the vacuum from the vacuum source 10 to the first passage 6b, and the valve 12 is next opened to supply the compressed air from the compressed air source 14 to the first passage 6b as shown in FIG. 3A. Accordingly, the compressed air is also discharged toward the peripheral

portion of the upper surface of the protective film 21, so that the peripheral portion of the protective film 21 is also pressed against the front side 11a of the wafer 11.

As a result, the protective film 21 can be brought into close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 so as to follow the shape of each bump 17 formed on the front side 11a of the wafer 11 as shown in FIGS. 1B, 3A, and 3B. Further, in this preferred embodiment, the protective film 21 is heated to be softened by the heater 20, so that the protective film 21 can be brought into close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 so as to be properly fitted to each bump 17. Further, when the protective film 21 is pressed against the front side 11a of the wafer 11, the liquid 23 is moved by the protective film 21 to push out the air left between the protective film 21 and the front side 11a of the wafer 11. Accordingly, the protective film 21 can be reliably brought into close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 so as to prevent the possibility that the air may be left between the wafer 11 and the protective film 21. In this preferred embodiment, a film of the liquid 23 is left between the protective film 21 and the wafer 11. That is, the protective film 21 is brought into close

contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 with a film of the liquid 23 interposed therebetween.

After performing the close contact making step, the protective member fixing step is performed to cover the protective film 21 with a protective member formed from a liquid resin, thereby fixing the protective member through the protective film 21 to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. FIG. 4A is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of pressing the wafer 11 through the protective film 21 against a liquid resin applied to a sheet, FIG. 4B is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of curing the liquid resin to thereby form the protective member, thereby fixing the protective member through the protective film 21 to the front side 11a of the wafer 11, and FIG. 4C is a schematic sectional view showing the wafer 11 in the condition where the protective member supported to the sheet is fixed through the protective film 21 to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. In FIGS. 4A and 4B, a part of the components is shown by functional blocks.

The protective member fixing step may be performed by using a protective member fixing apparatus 22 shown in FIGS. 4A and 4B. The protective member fixing apparatus 22 includes a holding table 24 for holding a

substantially flat sheet (carrier sheet) 25 formed of resin, for example. The holding table 24 has an upper surface formed with a central circular recess 24a larger in diameter than the wafer 11. An ultraviolet light source 26 is provided in the recess 24a. The upper end opening of the recess 24a is covered with a plate 28 capable of transmitting at least a part of ultraviolet light applied from the ultraviolet light source 26. The sheet 25 is supported at its central portion by the plate 28. A suction passage 24b is formed inside the holding table 24 in a peripheral area surrounding the recess 24a, and one end of the suction passage 24b opens to the upper surface of the holding table 24 in this peripheral area, so as to hold a peripheral portion of the sheet 25 under suction.

The other end of the suction passage 24b is connected through a valve 30 to a vacuum source 32. Accordingly, by applying a vacuum generated from the vacuum source 32 through the suction passage 24b to the peripheral portion of the sheet 25, the sheet 25 can be held on the holding table 24 under suction. There is provided above the holding table 24 a wafer holding unit 34 for holding the wafer 11. The wafer holding unit 34 has a lower surface 34a for holding the wafer 11. The

wafer holding unit 34 is vertically movably supported by a moving mechanism (not shown), so that the wafer holding unit 34 holding the wafer 11 can be moved in a vertical direction by operating this moving mechanism. The wafer holding unit 34 may be a vacuum suction type such that a vacuum is used to hold the wafer 11 under suction or may be of an electrostatic attraction type such that an electrostatic force is used to hold the wafer 11.

In the protective member fixing step, a liquid resin 27 is previously applied to the upper surface of the sheet 25 as shown in FIG. 4A, and the lower surface of the sheet 25 is held on the holding table 24. Further, the back side 11b of the wafer 11 is held on the lower surface 34a of the wafer holding unit 34. Accordingly, the protective film 21 kept in close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 is opposed to the liquid resin 27 applied to the sheet 25. The liquid resin 27 is a liquid resin curable by the ultraviolet light applied from the ultraviolet light source 26. For example, TEMPLOC (registered trademark) manufactured by Denka Co., Ltd. may be used as the liquid resin 27. While the sheet 25 is held on the holding table 24 in the condition where the liquid resin 27 is previously applied to the upper surface of the sheet 25 in this preferred embodiment, the

sheet 25 only may be first held on the holding table 24, and the liquid resin 27 may be next applied to the upper surface of the sheet 25. As shown in FIG. 4A, the liquid resin 27 is not completely flat on the sheet 25, but the central portion of the liquid resin 27 is preferably slightly raised.

Thereafter, as shown in FIG. 4B, the wafer holding unit 34 is lowered to press the front side 11a of the wafer 11 through the protective film 21 against the liquid resin 27. As a result, the liquid resin 27 is spread in the radial direction of the wafer 11 so as to fully cover the protective film 21. In this preferred embodiment, the amount of the liquid resin 27 to be applied and the amount of lowering of the wafer holding unit 34 are adjusted so that the whole of the front side 11a of the wafer 11 is covered with the liquid resin 27. Thereafter, ultraviolet light is applied from the ultraviolet light source 26 toward the liquid resin 27 to thereby cure the liquid resin 27. Accordingly, as shown in FIG. 4C, the liquid resin 27 is formed into a protective member 29 fully covering the protective film 21, and this protective member 29 is fixed to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. Thusly, the protective film 21 on the front side 11a of the wafer 11 is fully covered

with the protective member 29 formed from the liquid resin 27, thereby fixing the protective member 29 through the protective film 21 to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. Further, the sheet 25 is fixed to the protective member 29.

After performing the protective member fixing step, the grinding step is performed to grind the back side 11b of the wafer 11. FIG. 5A is a schematic side view, partially in cross section, showing a manner of grinding the back side 11b of the wafer 11, and FIG. 5B is a schematic sectional view of the wafer 11 processed by the grinding step.

The grinding step may be performed by using a grinding apparatus 42 shown in FIG. 5A. The grinding apparatus 42 includes a holding table (chuck table) 44 for holding the wafer 11 under suction. The holding table 44 is connected to a rotational drive source (not shown) such as a motor. Accordingly, the holding table 44 is adapted to be rotated about its axis substantially parallel to a vertical direction, by operating this rotational drive source. A moving mechanism (not shown) is provided below the holding table 44, so as to move the holding table 44 in a horizontal direction. The holding table 44 has an upper surface, a part of which is formed

as a holding surface 44a for holding under suction the sheet 25 fixed through the protective member 29 to the wafer 11. The holding surface 44a is connected through a suction passage (not shown) to a vacuum source (not shown), in which the suction passage is formed inside the holding table 44. Accordingly, by applying a vacuum generated from the vacuum source through the suction passage to the holding surface 44a in the condition where the sheet 25 is in contact with the holding surface 44a, the wafer 11 can be held through the sheet 25 and the protective member 29 on the holding table 44 under suction.

A grinding unit 46 is provided above the holding table 44. The grinding unit 46 includes a spindle housing (not shown) supported to an elevating mechanism (not shown). A spindle 48 is rotatably supported in the spindle housing. A disk-shaped mount 50 is fixed to the lower end of the spindle 48. A grinding wheel 52 is mounted on the lower surface of the mount 50, in which the grinding wheel 52 has substantially the same diameter as that of the mount 50. The grinding wheel 52 includes a wheel base 54 formed of metal such as stainless steel and aluminum. A plurality of abrasive members 56 are fixed to the lower surface of the wheel base 54 so as to be

annularly arranged along the outer circumference of the wheel base 54. A rotational drive source (not shown) such as a motor is connected to the upper end (base end) of the spindle 48. Accordingly, the grinding wheel 52 fixed to the spindle 48 is adapted to be rotated about its axis substantially parallel to a vertical direction, by operating this rotational drive source to produce a rotational force. A nozzle (not shown) for supplying a grinding fluid such as pure water to the wafer 11 is provided inside or in the vicinity of the grinding unit 46.

In the grinding step, the wafer 11 is first held on the holding table 44 of the grinding apparatus 42 under suction. More specifically, the wafer 11 is first placed on the holding table 44a of the holding table 44 in the condition where the sheet 25 fixed through the protective member 29 to the wafer 11 is in contact with the holding surface 44a. That is, the back side 11b of the wafer 11 is exposed upward in this condition. Thereafter, the vacuum source is operated to apply a vacuum to the holding surface 44a of the holding table 44. Accordingly, the wafer 11 is held through the sheet 25 and the protective member 29 on the holding table 44 under suction in the condition where the back side 11b of the

wafer 11 is exposed upward. Thereafter, the holding table 44 is moved to the position below the grinding unit 46. In this condition, both the holding table 44 and the grinding wheel 52 are rotated and the spindle housing (the spindle 48 and the grinding wheel 52) is then lowered as supplying the grinding fluid to the back side 11b of the wafer 11 as shown in FIG. 5A.

The lowering speed (feed speed) of the spindle housing is adjusted so that the lower surface of each abrasive member 56 is pressed against the back side 11b of the wafer 11 by a suitable force. Accordingly, the back side 11b of the wafer 11 can be ground by the grinding wheel 52 to thereby reduce the thickness of the wafer 11. When the thickness of the wafer 11 is reduced to a predetermined thickness (finished thickness) as shown in FIG. 5B, this grinding step is finished. While one set of grinding unit 46 is used to grind the back side 11b of the wafer 11 in this preferred embodiment, two or more sets of grinding units may be used to grind the back side 11b of the wafer 11. For example, a first set of abrasive members each containing large-sized abrasive grains may be first used to perform coarse grinding on the back side 11b of the wafer 11, and a second set of abrasive members each containing small-

sized abrasive grains may be next used to perform fine grinding on the back side 11b of the wafer 11. In this case, the flatness of the back side 11b of the wafer 11 can be improved without greatly increasing the time required for grinding.

After performing the grinding step, the peeling step is performed to peel the protective film 21 and the protective member 29 from the wafer 11 thinned by the grinding step. FIG. 6 is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of peeling the protective film 21 and the protective member 29 from the wafer 11.

In the peeling step, a wafer holding unit 62 having a holding surface 62a is used to hold the wafer 11. That is, the back side 11b of the wafer 11 is held on the holding surface 62a of the wafer holding unit 62. The wafer holding unit 62 may be of a vacuum suction type such that a vacuum is used to hold the wafer 11 on the holding surface 62a under suction or may be of an electrostatic attraction type such that an electrostatic force is used to hold the wafer 11 on the holding surface 62a. After holding the wafer 11 on the holding surface 62a of the wafer holding unit 62, a peeling unit 64 is used to peel the protective member 29 and the protective film 21. More specifically, a peripheral portion of the

sheet 25 is gripped by the peeling unit 64. Thereafter, the wafer holding unit 62 and the peeling unit 64 are relatively moved so that the peripheral portion of the sheet 25 is moved away from the wafer 11 as shown in FIG. 6. Accordingly, all of the protective film 21, the protective member 29, and the sheet 25 can be peeled together from the wafer 11 as shown in FIG. 6.

In the wafer processing method according to the above preferred embodiment mentioned above, the protective film 21 is first brought into close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 on which the devices 15 each having the bumps (asperities) 17 are formed in such a manner as to follow the shape of each bump 17. Thereafter, the protective film 21 is covered with the protective member 29 formed from the liquid resin 27 curable by ultraviolet light (external stimulus), thereby fixing the protective member 29 through the protective film 21 to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. Accordingly, by forming the protective member 29 having a suitable thickness, the asperities due to the bumps 17 formed on the front side 11a of the wafer 11 can be sufficiently absorbed.

In the wafer processing method according to this preferred embodiment, the protective film 21 is not

bonded to the device area 11d of the wafer 11, but is merely in close contact with the device area 11d. Accordingly, the protective member 29 and the protective film 21 can be simply peeled from the wafer 11 without the need for any extensive work dedicated to peeling, such as immersion of the wafer 11 in a solution or heating of the wafer 11 at high temperatures. Thus, according to this preferred embodiment, it is possible to provide a wafer processing method which can exhibit the effects that the influence of the asperities due to the bumps 17 present on the front side 11a of the wafer 11 can be sufficiently suppressed in grinding the back side 11b of the wafer 11 and that the peeling operation after grinding can also be simply performed.

Further, in the wafer processing method according to this preferred embodiment, the protective film 21 is pressed against the front side 11a of the wafer 11 through the liquid 23 supplied to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. Accordingly, it is possible to prevent that air may be left between the wafer 11 and the protective film 21, thereby reliably bringing the protective film 21 into close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11. As a result, although the protective film 21 does not have adhesion by an adhesive (paste), there is no

possibility that the protective film 21 and the protective member 29 may be peeled from the wafer 11 in grinding the wafer 11.

The present invention is not limited to the above preferred embodiment, but various modifications may be made. For example, while the liquid resin 27 is a liquid resin curable by ultraviolet light as external stimulus in this preferred embodiment, another type of liquid resin curable by any external stimulus (e.g., heat) other than ultraviolet light may be used as the liquid resin 27.

Further, while the circular protective film 21 having a diameter substantially equal to that of the wafer 11 is used in this preferred embodiment, the diameter of the protective film 21 may be smaller than the diameter of the wafer 11. For example, the diameter of the protective film 21 may correspond to the diameter of the device area 11d of the wafer 11. In this case, the protective member 29 formed from the liquid resin 27 adheres directly to the peripheral marginal area 11e of the wafer 11. Accordingly, although the protective film 21 does not have adhesion by an adhesive (paste), the protective film 21 and the protective member 29 can be firmly fixed to the wafer 11.

Further, in this preferred embodiment, the wafer 11

is pressed through the protective film 21 against the liquid resin 27 applied to the sheet 25, thereby fixing the protective member 29 to the wafer 11. As a modification, the liquid resin 27 may be dropped onto the wafer 11 or the protective film 21 without using the sheet 25, thereby fixing the protective member 29 to the wafer 11. In this case, the exposed surface of the protective member 29 is preferably flattened by using a surface planer or the like. By flattening the exposed surface of the protective member 29 to be held on the holding table 44 in grinding the wafer 11, the back side 11b of the wafer 11 as a work surface can be ground flat in the grinding step.

Further, while the protective film 21 is softened by the heat applied from the heater 20 in the close contact making step in this preferred embodiment, softening of the protective film 21 is not essential in the close contact making step. Further, the protective film 21 may be softened by any methods other than heating by the heater 20.

Further, while all of the protective film 21, the protective member 29, and the sheet 25 are peeled together from the wafer 11 by simply gripping the peripheral portion of the sheet 25 and moving it away

from the wafer 11 in the peeling step according to this preferred embodiment, another method may be used to peel the protective film 21, the protective member 29, and the sheet 25 from the wafer 11. FIG. 7 is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of peeling the protective film 21, the protective member 29, and the sheet 25 from the wafer 11 in a peeling step in a wafer processing method according to a first modification. The other steps in the wafer processing method according to the first modification may be the same as those in the wafer processing method according to the above preferred embodiment.

In the peeling step according to the first modification, the back side 11b of the wafer 11 is held on the holding surface 62a of the wafer holding unit 62 as shown in FIG. 7. The wafer holding unit 62 may be of a vacuum suction type such that a vacuum is used to hold the wafer 11 on the holding surface 62a under suction or may be of an electrostatic attraction type such that an electrostatic force is used to hold the wafer 11 on the holding surface 62a. In the first modification, a heater 66 is provided inside the wafer holding unit 62 as shown in FIG. 7.

After holding the wafer 11 on the holding surface

62a of the wafer holding unit 62, a peripheral portion of the sheet 25 is gripped by the peeling unit 64. Thereafter, the wafer holding unit 62 and the peeling unit 64 are relatively moved so that the peripheral portion of the sheet 25 is moved away from the wafer 11 as shown in FIG. 7. At this time, the heater 66 is operated to heat the liquid 23 left between the protective film 21 and the wafer 11, thereby vaporizing the liquid 23. Thus, all of the protective film 21, the protective member 29, and the sheet 25 can be peeled together from the wafer 11 as shown in FIG. 7.

In the wafer processing method according to the first modification, the liquid 23 left between the protective film 21 and the wafer 11 is heated to be vaporized by operating the heater 66, so that the protective film 21 can be easily peeled from the wafer 11.

FIG. 8 is a schematic sectional view showing a manner of peeling the protective film 21, the protective member 29, and the sheet 25 from the wafer 11 in a peeling step in a wafer processing method according to a second modification. The other steps in the wafer processing method according to the second modification may be the same as those in the wafer processing method according to the above preferred embodiment.

The peeling step according to the second modification may be performed by using a vacuum chamber 72 shown in FIG. 8. The vacuum chamber 72 includes a casing member 72a having an upper opening having a size allowing the pass of the wafer 11 and a door member 72b for closing the upper opening of the casing member 72a. The casing member 72a is connected through an outlet pipe 74 and a valve 76 to a vacuum source (not shown). The casing member 72a is also connected to an inlet pipe 78 and a valve 80 for introducing the outside air (atmospheric air) into the vacuum chamber 72.

The door member 72b is formed with a vertically extending through hole 72c. A wafer holding unit 84 is inserted through the through hole 72c with a hermetic bearing 82 interposed therebetween, so that the wafer holding unit 84 is vertically movably supported to the door member 72b by the hermetic bearing 82. The wafer holding unit 84 has a substantially flat lower surface 84a as a holding surface larger in diameter than the wafer 11. The wafer holding unit 84 may be of an electrostatic attraction type such that an electrostatic force is used to hold the wafer 11 on the lower surface 84a. Further, a heater 86 is provided inside the wafer holding unit 84. A peeling unit 88 is provided in the

vicinity of the wafer holding unit 84.

In the peeling step according to the second modification, the back side 11b of the wafer 11 is held on the lower surface 84a of the wafer holding unit 84. Thereafter, the door member 72b is closed to cover the upper opening of the casing member 72a, and the valve 80 is closed. Thereafter, the valve 76 is opened to thereby evacuate the inside space of the vacuum chamber 72. Thereafter, a peripheral portion of the sheet 25 is gripped by the peeling unit 88, and the wafer holding unit 84 and the peeling unit 88 are relatively moved so that the peripheral portion of the sheet 25 is moved away from the wafer 11. At this time, the heater 86 may be operated to heat the liquid 23 left between the protective film 21 and the wafer 11, thereby vaporizing the liquid 23. Thus, all of the protective film 21, the protective member 29, and the sheet 25 can be peeled together from the wafer 11 as shown in FIG. 8.

In the wafer processing method according to the second modification, the protective film 21 is peeled from the wafer 11 under vacuum. Accordingly, the liquid 23 left between the protective film 21 and the wafer 11 is vaporized in the peeling step, so that the protective film 21 can be easily peeled.

Further, while the compressed air is discharged toward the upper surface of the protective film 21 to thereby press the protective film 21 against the front side 11a of the wafer 11 in the above preferred embodiment, another method may be used to press the protective film 21 against the wafer 11. FIGS. 9A and 9B are schematic sectional views for illustrating a close contact making step in a wafer processing method according to a third modification.

The wafer processing method according to the third modification includes a liquid supplying step, in which the liquid 23 is preferably supplied to at least an area where the close contact between the protective film 21 and the wafer 11 is started. Accordingly, in the next close contact making step, the protective film 21 can be reliably brought into close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 so as to prevent the possibility that air may be left between the wafer 11 and the protective film 21. The other steps in the wafer processing method according to the third modification may be the same as those in the wafer processing method according to the above preferred embodiment or the above modifications.

In the close contact making step according to the third modification, the back side 11b of the wafer 11 is

held on a holding surface 92a of a holding table 92. The basic configuration of the holding table 92 may be the same as that of the holding table 44 except that a heater 94 is provided inside the holding table 92 in the third modification. After holding the wafer 11 on the holding table 92, the protective film 21 previously held on the lower surface of a release sheet 31 is opposed to the front side 11a of the wafer 11. Thereafter, a pressure roller 96 is used to apply a downward pressure to the upper surface of the release sheet 31, thereby pressing the protective film 21 against the front side 11a of the wafer 11 as shown in FIG. 9A. At this time, the heater 94 is preferably operated to heat the protective film 21, thereby softening the protective film 21. Accordingly, the protective film 21 can be brought into close contact with the front side 11a of the wafer 11 with the liquid 23 interposed therebetween. Finally, the release sheet 31 is released from the protective film 21 as shown in FIG. 9B. As a modification, this close contact making step using the pressure roller 96 may be performed in a vacuum chamber.

The present invention is not limited to the details of the above described preferred embodiment. The scope of the invention is defined by the appended claims and all

changes and modifications as fall within the equivalence of the scope of the claims are therefore to be embraced by the invention.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A wafer processing method comprising:

a liquid supplying step of supplying a liquid to the front side of a wafer on which a central device area and a peripheral marginal area surrounding said device area are formed, a plurality of devices each having asperities being formed in said device area;

a close contact making step of pressing a protective film against the front side of said wafer with said liquid interposed therebetween after performing said liquid supplying step, thereby bringing said protective film into close contact with the front side of said wafer so as to follow said asperities of each device formed on the front side of said wafer;

a protective member fixing step of covering said protective film with a protective member formed from a liquid resin curable by external stimulus after performing said close contact making step, thereby fixing said protective member through said protective film to the front side of said wafer;

a grinding step of holding said protective member fixed to said wafer on a holding surface of a chuck table in the condition where the back side of said wafer is exposed after performing said protective member fixing

step, and next grinding the back side of said wafer to thereby reduce the thickness of said wafer; and

a peeling step of peeling said protective film and said protective member from said wafer after performing said grinding step.

2. The wafer processing method according to claim 1, wherein said peeling step includes the step of heating said liquid left between said protective film and the front side of said wafer to thereby vaporize said liquid.

3. The wafer processing method according to claim 1, wherein said peeling step includes the steps of loading said wafer with said protective member into a vacuum chamber and next evacuating said vacuum chamber to thereby vaporize said liquid left between said protective film and the front side of said wafer.

4. The wafer processing method according to claim 1, wherein said liquid supplying step includes the step of supplying said liquid to a central portion of the front side of said wafer.

5. The wafer processing method according to claim 1,

wherein said protective film has a first surface and a second surface opposite to said first surface, said first surface being opposed to said wafer;

said close contact making step including the step of discharging a gas toward said second surface of said protective film to thereby press said protective film against the front side of said wafer.

6. The wafer processing method according to claim 1, wherein said close contact making step includes the step of using a pressure roller to thereby press said protective film against the front side of said wafer.

7. The wafer processing method according to claim 1, wherein said protective member fixing step includes the steps of applying said liquid resin to a flat sheet, next pressing said wafer against said liquid resin through said protective film to thereby fully cover said protective film with said liquid resin, and next applying said external stimulus to said liquid resin to thereby cure said liquid resin, thereby forming said protective member from said liquid resin and fixing said protective member to said wafer.