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Björkroth, Johanna

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Lactobacillus fructivorans Spoilage of Tomato Ketchup

K. JOHANNA BJORKROTH* and HANNU J. KORKEALA

Department of Food and Environmental Hygiene, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 57, FIN-00014, Helsinki University, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Spoilage characterized by bulging as a result of gas formation in bottled ketchup was studied. Samples produced microbial growth on MRS and Rogosa selective Lactobacillus agar. Seventy randomly selected isolates typed by using restriction endonuclease (CiaI, EcoRI, HindIII) analysis were found to have identical DNA fragment patterns in gel electrophoresis. The strain was identified as Lactobacillus fructivorans using morphological, physiological and biochemical characteristics, combined with the information obtained from ribotyping. Factors affecting growth and survival of this L. fructivorans strain in ketchup production were also studied. An L. fructivorans count of 10^5 CFU/g resulted in spoilage of inoculated ketchup samples. Spoilage occurred only in samples incubated at 15 to 30°C. The L. fructivorans implicated in causing spoilage demonstrated heat resistance with a D value of 1.2 min at 65°C. The strain did not show resistance to alkaline active detergent-sanitizer; alkyl dimethylbenzyl ammonium chloride and alkyl dimethyl ethylbenzyl ammonium chloride-containing sanitizer were also found to be effective antimicrobial agents.

Key words: Lactobacillus fructivorans, lactic acid bacteria, spoilage, tomato ketchup, characterization, molecular typing

Tomato ketchup is considered to be a shelf-stable product. Low pH, addition of sodium benzoate and heating of the mixture during the manufacturing process contribute to the shelf stability of ketchup. In acidic (below pH 4.0) foods like ketchup, spoilage microbes are usually found to be restricted to non-spore-forming bacteria (lactic acid bacteria), or yeasts (Saccharomyces spp., Candida spp.) or molds (Byssoschlamus fulva) (2, 12, 14, 16, 19, 41, 43). Bacillus coagulans, Clostridium pasteurianum, and the Bacillus macerans-B. polymyxa group can also cause spoilage at pH 4.0 to 3.8 (6, 19), but growth is retarded. Heterofermentative lactobacilli (42, 43) have been shown to cause gas formation in ketchup but further species identification of the spoilage strains was not performed (43) or the species characterized (42) do not exist in current taxonomy.

Despite the factors used for controlling microbial growth in ketchup, in-plant spoilage of ketchup occurred inflicting considerable economic hardship on the manufacturer. Spoilage was indicated by bulging of plastic ketchup bottles as a result of gas formation. The expected shelf life of this product is 8 months. Bulging occurred after 8 weeks in bottles from several product lots. No increase in total aerobic bacteriological count or yeasts were detected in routine quality-control tests.

In this study, the isolation and identification of the spoilage strain of Lactobacillus fructivorans found in the bottled ketchup is described. This organism was first isolated from spoiled salad dressing (9) and has been reported to spoil acidic food or ethanol-containing sources, mainly mayonnaise, salad dressings, vinegar preserves, sake, dessert wines, and aperitifs (12, 18, 27). L. fructivorans can be difficult to isolate (9, 37) and identification of a species of the genus Lactobacillus using classical methods of physiological testing is not always sufficient (18). Traditional microbiological methods together with rDNA typing techniques were used for characterization. Factors affecting the growth and survival of this L. fructivorans strain in the production plant environment were also studied.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ketchup samples

Eight bulging plastic bottles of ketchup, one from each of eight different manufacturing lots, were sampled. The ingredients of the ketchup were tomato puree, spices, sugar, starch, sodium benzoate, acetic acid, ascorbic acid, emulsifiers, and coloring substances. The pH of each lot was 3.8 ± 0.1. After mixing of the ingredients the lot was steam heated for 10 min at 85°C. The temperature was reduced and maintained at 80°C for 10 to 20 min. Excess air was removed after heat treatment. The ketchup was cooled to 15°C prior to bottling. The bottling line was not enclosed. During bottling, caps and empty and full bottles were briefly exposed to ambient air.

Reference strains

Type strains used for the identification of the L. fructivorans spoilage strain were: Lactobacillus brevis ATCC 14869, Lactobacillus buchneri ATCC 4005, Lactobacillus collinoides ATCC 27612, Lactobacillus fructivorans ATCC 8288, Lactobacillus hilgardii ATCC 8290, Weissella confusa ATCC 10881, Weissella halotolerans ATCC 35410, Weissella viridescens ATCC 12706.
Microbiological analyses

Total plate counts of the ketchup samples were determined by using pour plates with plate count agar (Difco Laboratories, Detroit, MI, USA). Parallel plates were made for aerobic and anaerobic enumeration. The anaerobic environment was created using an anaerobic jar with an H₂ plus CO₂-generating kit (Oxoid Ltd, Basingstoke, UK). Parallel plates with blood agar (Columbia agar base) (GIBCO BRL, Paisley, UK) were also inoculated for aerobic and anaerobic determination. Detection of lactic acid bacteria was performed by using MRS agar (Oxoid Ltd) and Lactobacillus enumeration using Rogosa selective Lactobacillus (SL) agar (Orion Diagnostica, Espoo, Finland). MRS and Rogosa SL agar were incubated anaerobically. All plates were incubated at 30°C. Growth was inspected after 2 days. Plates with no growth were incubated for an additional 5 days (i.e., for an incubation period of 7 days) and were inspected daily for growth.

Ten- to twenty-gram samples were also enriched for 2 days at 30°C in meat extract broth (Orion Diagnostica), Robertson's medium (32), and MRS broth (Difco). Meat extract broth was incubated under aerobic conditions and Robertson's and MRS broths anaerobically. If growth was not observed in 2 days incubation was continued for up to 7 days. After the enrichment the procedure described by NCFA (32) was followed. Seventy colonies from MRS and Rogosa SL agar, 35 colonies from each agar type, were randomly isolated and streaked to purity. Isolates cultured from the 8 bottles were included.

Isolation of DNA, restriction endonuclease analysis (REA) and determination of rRNA-coding gene restriction patterns (ribotyping)

DNA was isolated according to the guanidium thiocyanate method of Pitcher et al. (33) modified by Björkroth and Korkeala (3) with combined mutanolysin (Sigma Chemical Company, St. Louis, MO, USA) and lysozyme (Sigma) treatment. Restriction endonuclease digestion of 5 μg of DNA was done according to the manufacturer’s instructions with Clal, HindIII, EcoRI, Smal and SacII (New England Biolabs, Beverly, MA, USA). The REA, genomic blots, and the rDNA probe for rRNA-coding gene restriction patterns (ribotypes) (17) were prepared as described by Björkroth and Korkeala (3).

Determination of D values

D values were determined for one spoilage isolate and for one Lactobacillus fructivorans type strain (ATCC 8288) in sterile ketchup at 65°C and at 72°C using the open-tube-method (41). REA was performed for 40 randomly selected colonies from the plates inoculated during heat inactivation testing to ensure that the growing bacteria were the same as the inoculated strain.

RESULTS

All 8 bottles showed strong gas formation and had a pungent odor. The typical pH value of this product is 3.8 ± 0.1. The 8 sample bottles had pH values of 3.3 to 3.4. Growth was not detected on directly cultured PCA plates or blood agar, in enriched meat extract or Robertson’s broths. Colonies were detected on directly cultured MRS and Rogosa SL agar media from the ketchup of all 8 bottles. The parallel enriched MRS broths showed growth as well. Directly cultured MRS plates showed growth of 3 × 10⁵ to 9 × 10⁷ CFU/g and on Rogosa SL plates 2 × 10⁴ to 1 × 10⁵ CFU/g. Microbiological counts of all the ketchup samples were very similar on parallel MRS and Rogosa SL agar media, suggesting Lactobacillus spp. growth.

The Clal, EcoRI and HindIII digests of all 70 isolates were identical. REAs generated by Smal and SacII digests did not produce suitable patterns for characterization of these strains. The general morphological, physiological, and biochemical characteristics of the isolates were: gram-positive, thin rods, strong gas production from glucose, and able to use a very limited spectrum of carbohydrates: only ribose, α-fructose, α-glucose, and gluconate were fermented. Growth was observed at 15°C but not at 4 or 45°C. Survival tests were positive for 10 min at 65°C. Ammonia was produced from arginine and growth was observed in 8% NaCl concentration, but not in 10% NaCl-containing broth. Optimal pH values favorable for growth of the spoilage strain were 4.5 to 5.5; growth was not detected below pH 3.5. Isolates grew weakly on MRS agar and in MRS broth (pH 6). Subcultivation of the clones resulted in better growth. Isolates and the L. fructivorans type strain grew in MRS broth containing 5%, 10%, and 15% ethanol.

An L. fructivorans strain was suspected to be the cause of spoilage resulting in the bulged ketchup bottles. The identification was confirmed by comparing the ribotypes of
the spoilage strain with corresponding patterns of heterofermentative Lactobacillus type strains that are biochemically or genetically close to L. fructivorans. These results (Fig. 1a, lanes 1, 2, 10, and 11; Fig. 1b lanes 1 and 2) showed that the ketchup isolates and the L. fructivorans type strain had very similar ribotypes generated by ClaI, EcoRI, and HindIII digests. Only ClaI digests generated different patterns between the type strain and ketchup isolates (Fig. 1a, lanes 1 and 2). L. fructivorans REA patterns were clearly distinguished from the patterns of the other type strains studied.

The L. fructivorans isolates used for inoculation produced characteristic spoilage changes in 3 weeks when incubated at 15 to 25°C. Test samples incubated at 30°C already showed spoilage changes after 2 weeks. Samples were deemed unfit for human consumption when bacterial colonies reached 10⁶ CFU/g on MRS agar. Spoilage was not detected in test samples incubated at 5 and 10°C. Samples incubated at 42°C showed 90% reduction of colonies after 3 days. The same reduction was observed after 5 days at 37°C. In the European suspension test both the detergent sanitizer and the plant sanitizer were found to be very effective (microbicidal effect, ME, was 8) on L. fructivorans strain causing spoilage.

Heat-inactivation kinetics of the spoilage strain and the type strain resembled each other. For the spoilage isolate, a $D_{30}$ of 1.2 min and a $D_{15}$ of 0.4 min were obtained in ketchup. Corresponding values for the L. fructivorans ATCC 8288 were $D_{30}$, 0.9 min and $D_{15}$, 0.4 min. These values were calculated from the log-linear parts of the inactivation patterns. However, a clear tail was noticed in all inactivation curves when testing was continued. In the beginning of the test there were 10⁸ to 10⁹ CFU/g of inoculated ketchup. At 65°C tailing started after reduction of 3 to 4 log cycles and at 72°C the same effect was noticed after reduction of 4 to 5 log cycles. Forty strains analyzed by REA all shared the same pattern as the inoculant.

**DISCUSSION**

L. fructivorans strains are fastidious on primary isolation (18, 27), resulting in detection difficulties when PCA or blood-agar media are used. Depending on the source of isolation, mevalonic acid, tomato juice, and/or ethanol are required for growth (18). Modified MRS medium or other media designed for heterofermentative lactobacilli may provide better growth conditions (15, 40, 44). Strains from nonalcoholic sources are known to become less fastidious during laboratory transfers and to start growing well in basic MRS broth (18). This phenomenon was also noticed with the original strains isolated from ketchup. High preincubation temperatures used in the quality control of preserved foods prior to microbiological analyses also contribute to difficulties in detection of L. fructivorans. For fully preserved canned foods, preincubation at 30°C for 14 days has been recommended (32). Bulging was not present in test bottles incubated over 8 weeks at 37°C at the manufacturing plant. In our inoculation test, a 5-day incubation period at 37°C reduced 90% of inoculated L. fructivorans cells.

Lactic acid bacteria are not generally considered to be heat resistant. In meat-processing plants, lactic acid bacteria contamination leading to spoilage problems, with the exception of that caused by Weissella viridescens (7, 28, 30, 31), is usually considered a post-heat-treatment issue (7, 13, 21, 23, 24, 25, 29, 30). Due to the layout of the ketchup-processing line, post-heat-treatment contamination during cooling and packaging was possible. L. fructivorans has been reported to be more heat resistant than other lactic acid bacteria tested (38, 39). Splittstoesser et al. (39) established a D value of 1.7 min at 60°C for an L. fructivorans strain in 12% ethanol wine originally isolated from a spoiled, premixed Bloody Mary cocktail. This D value is close to the 1.2-min $D_{65}$ value of the ketchup spoilage strain determined in this study. Due to the strong tailing effect noticed in $D_{65}$ and $D_{15}$ plots, the D value evaluation must be considered an estimation. Biphasic destruction of L. fructivorans has also been observed before (38). D values for the second phase, following a reduction of about 4 log cycles, ranged from 4 to 6 min at 60°C. It is
difficult to determine if the heat treatment used in the ketchup processing entirely destroys the spoilage-causing \textit{L. fructivorans} strain, especially when the level of initial contamination was unknown. Tomato juice is also known to have factors associated with heat resistance of lactic acid bacteria (20). Pectins were found to be the main tomato juice constituents protecting \textit{Lactobacillus fermentum} cells against heat (20).

Species identification of \textit{L. fructivorans} is considered to be difficult using traditional phenotypic markers (1, 15, 18). High tolerance to ethanol, a limited spectrum of fermentable carbohydrates and pronounced acidophily are characteristics typical for both \textit{L. fructivorans} and \textit{Lactobacillus hilgardii}. \textit{Lactobacillus suebicus} is very tolerant to ethanol and low pH and ferments a broad spectrum of carbohydrates; it is genotypically closely related to \textit{Lactobacillus vaccinosters} (10). Ribotyping can be of great help in species identification (4, 17, 34). Molecular typing techniques such as REA and ribotyping can also be excellent tools for industrial contamination analysis (3, 4, 5). These methods can provide information concerning spoilage by revealing the nature of the contamination. The spoilage described here was eradicated by increased sanitizing of the production line using the substances found to be effective against the causative \textit{L. fructivorans} strain.

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