Erythritol production from crude glycerol by *Yarrowia lipolytica*

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KEYWORDS

Glycerol, Erythritol, *Yarrowia lipolytica*, Fermentation and Optimization

ABSTRACT

Erythritol, a low-calorie sugar alcohol with applications in the food and pharmaceutical industries, is traditionally produced through chemical synthesis. However, biotechnological methods using microorganisms such as *Yarrowia lipolytica* offer a sustainable alternative. In the present study the erythritol production from crude glycerol was carried out using the *Yarrowia lipolytica* strain MTCC 9518, MTCC 9519, MTCC 9520, and MTCC, 9521. Erythritol and mannitol production, as well as, cellular growth and glycerol consumption were monitored for 7 days. *Y. lipolytica* species MTCC 9519 proved to be the most suitable for the production of erythritol, under the tested conditions, being the strains *Y. lipolytica* (MTCC 9518) and *Y. lipolytica* MTCC 9520 the ones that produced the highest concentration (23 and 29g·L-1), leading to highest yield (38 % w/w) and productivity of erythritol (0.15 and 0.11 g·L-1h -1. The best results of erythritol concentration (56 g·L-1), yield (42 % w/w) and productivity (0.37 g·L-1·h-1) were obtained in the experiments with *Y. lipolytica* 9519.

Introduction

Glycerol is in abundant supply on the market because of rising biodiesel demand. Glycerol's value has a lot to give in terms of reducing the price of biodiesel manufacturing and decreasing environmental issues brought on by this bio fuel's manufacturers. The most significant organic acid produced during fermentation is citric acid, which finds extensive usage in the food, drug, & chemical industries. Worldwide production of citric acid (CA) for industrial usage exceeds 2 million tonnes annually.

Erythritol, a four-carbon sugar alcohol, is gaining popularity as a natural sweetener due to its zero-calorie content, high digestive tolerance, and non-cariogenic properties (Munro *et al.*, 1998). Its use spans the food, beverage, and pharmaceutical industries, where it serves as a sugar substitute and functional ingredient (Goossens and Röper, 1994). Traditional methods of erythritol production involve chemical synthesis, which often entails high energy consumption and environmental impact. Consequently, biotechnological production using microorganisms has emerged as a promising alternative, offering sustainability and cost-effectiveness (Moon *et al.*, 2010).

Among various microorganisms, the yeast *Yarrowia lipolytica* has shown considerable potential for erythritol production due to its robustness and versatility in metabolizing various substrates (Kim *et al.*, 2013). *Y. lipolytica* is an oleaginous yeast known for its

ability to assimilate hydrophobic substrates and accumulate high levels of lipids and polyols, making it a suitable candidate for erythritol biosynthesis (Papanikolaou and Aggelis, 2010). Moreover, its genome has been extensively studied and manipulated, facilitating metabolic engineering efforts to enhance erythritol yield (Müller *et al.*, 2011).

Several factors influence the efficiency of erythritol production by *Y. lipolytica*, including the type of carbon and nitrogen sources, pH, temperature, and aeration conditions (Rymowicz *et al.*, 2009). Previous studies have demonstrated that glucose, fructose, and glycerol are effective carbon sources for erythritol production (Janek *et al.*, 2017). The type and concentration of nitrogen sources also play a critical role, with organic nitrogen sources often proving more beneficial than inorganic ones (Miranda *et al.*, 1999). Additionally, maintaining an optimal pH and temperature range is crucial for maximizing erythritol yield and ensuring the viability of the yeast cells throughout the fermentation process (Pirog *et al.*, 2013).

Despite these advancements, there remains a need for comprehensive optimization strategies to fully exploit the erythritol production capabilities of *Y. lipolytica*. This study aims to optimize erythritol production by systematically evaluating the effects of different substrates and fermentation conditions. By employing statistical tools such as response surface methodology (RSM), we aim to identify and fine-tune key parameters that influence erythritol synthesis. The ultimate goal is to develop an efficient and scalable bioprocess for erythritol production, contributing to the growing demand for sustainable and natural sweeteners in the market.

Materials and Methods

Microorganism and Maintenance

Yarrowia lipolytica strain MTCC 9519 procured form IMTECH Chandigarh, was used for erythritol production in this study. The strain was maintained on YPD agar plates (1% yeast extract, 2% peptone, 2% dextrose, and 2% agar) at 4°C and subculture every month to ensure viability.

Culture Media and Conditions

Pre-cultures were prepared by inoculating a single colony from the YPD agar plate into 100 mL of YPD broth (1% yeast extract, 2% peptone, and 2% dextrose) in a 250 mL Erlenmeyer flask. The pre-cultures were incubated at 28°C with agitation at 200 rpm for 24 hours. The main fermentation medium was composed of varying concentrations of carbon sources (glucose, fructose, glycerol) and nitrogen sources (ammonium sulfate, yeast extract, peptone). The initial pH of the fermentation medium was adjusted to 5.5 using 1 M NaOH or HCl.

Optimization of Culture Conditions

To determine the optimal conditions for erythritol production, we performed a series of batch fermentations. Variables studied included different carbon sources (glucose, fructose, and glycerol) at concentrations ranging from 20 g/L to 100 g/L, and nitrogen sources (ammonium sulfate, yeast extract, and peptone) at concentrations ranging from 2 g/L to 10 g/L. Additionally, the effects of initial pH (4.0, 5.0, 5.5, 6.0, and 6.5),

temperature (25°C, 28°C, and 30°C), and agitation rates (100, 200, and 300 rpm) were investigated.

Fermentation Process

Batch fermentations were carried out in 1 L bioreactors containing 500 mL of fermentation medium. The bioreactors were inoculated with 5% (v/v) pre-culture and incubated at 28°C with an initial agitation rate of 200 rpm. Aeration was maintained at 1 vvm (volume of air per volume of medium per minute). Samples were taken at 24-hour intervals for analysis of erythritol concentration, cell biomass, and residual sugar content.

Analytical Methods

Erythritol concentration was determined using high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) equipped with a refractive index detector. A carbohydrate analysis column was used with deionized water as the mobile phase at a flow rate of 0.6 mL/min. Cell biomass was measured by optical density at 600 nm (OD600) and dry cell weight (DCW). Residual sugar concentration in the fermentation broth was determined using the dinitrosalicylic acid (DNS) method.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using response surface methodology (RSM) to identify the optimal conditions for erythritol production. A central composite design (CCD) was employed to evaluate the interactive effects of the key variables identified in the preliminary experiments. Statistical analysis was performed using Design-Expert software (Stat-Ease, Inc., Minneapolis, MN, USA). The significance of the model and variables was determined at a 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$).

Scale-Up Studies

Based on the optimal conditions identified, scale-up studies were conducted in a 5 L bioreactor with a working volume of 3 L. The fermentation parameters were monitored and controlled using a bioreactor control system. Samples were taken periodically for analysis, and the erythritol yield was compared with that obtained in the small-scale fermentations to assess the scalability of the optimized process.

Results and Discussion

Optimization of Carbon and Nitrogen Sources

To optimize erythritol production, we initially investigated the effects of different carbon sources (glucose, fructose, and glycerol) at varying concentrations. As shown in Table 1, glucose at a concentration of 80 g/L yielded the highest erythritol production, reaching 44.8 g/L after 96 hours of fermentation. Fructose and glycerol were less effective, producing 37.6 g/L and 30.4 g/L of erythritol, respectively.

Table 1. Erythritol production by *Yarrowia lipolytica* MTCC 9519 using different carbon sources.

Carbon Source	Concentration (g/L)	Erythritol Yield (g/L)
Glucose	80	44.8
Fructose	80	37.6
Glycerol	80	30.4

The type and concentration of nitrogen sources also played a significant role in erythritol production. As illustrated in Table 2, yeast extract at a concentration of 5 g/L resulted in the highest erythritol yield of 45.2 g/L, followed by peptone and ammonium sulfate. *Figure 1. Effect of initial pH on erythritol production by Yarrowia lipolytica. Error bars represent standard deviation (n=3).*

Table 2. Erythritol production by *Yarrowia lipolytica MTCC 9519* using different nitrogen sources.

Nitrogen Source	Concentration (g/L)	Erythritol Yield (g/L)
Yeast Extract	5	45.2
Peptone	5	39.4
Ammonium Sulfate	5	35.6

Figure 2. Effect of temperature on erythritol production by Yarrowia lipolytica. Error bars represent standard deviation (n=3).

Effect of pH and Temperature: The influence of initial pH and temperature on erythritol production was evaluated. Figure 1 shows that an initial pH of 5.5 was optimal, resulting in an erythritol yield of 46.5 g/L. pH levels outside the range of 5.0 to 6.0 significantly reduced erythritol production. Temperature optimization studies indicated that 28°C was the most favorable, yielding 46.5 g/L of erythritol, as shown in Figure 2. Temperatures above 30°C or below 25°C negatively impacted erythritol production.

Response Surface Methodology (RSM) Optimization: A central composite design (CCD) was employed to optimize erythritol production further. The response surface plots (Figure 3) illustrate the interaction between glucose concentration and pH. The model predicted an optimal erythritol yield of 52.4 g/L under the following conditions: glucose concentration of 85 g/L, yeast extract concentration of 5 g/L, pH 5.5, and temperature 28°C. Experimental validation under these conditions yielded 51.8 g/L, closely matching the predicted value.

Scale-Up Studies: Scale-up experiments conducted in a 5 L bioreactor under the optimized conditions confirmed the scalability of the process. The erythritol yield in the 5 L bioreactor was 51.2 g/L, which was consistent with the small-scale batch fermentations. The results demonstrate the feasibility of industrial-scale erythritol production using the optimized conditions identified in this study.

The study successfully optimized erythritol production by *Yarrowia lipolytica*, MTCC 9519 identifying glucose and yeast extract as the most effective carbon and nitrogen sources, respectively. The optimal initial pH and temperature were found to be 5.5 and 28°C. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the

importance of substrate type and environmental conditions on erythritol yield (Rymowicz et al., 2009; Janek *et al.*, 2017).

The use of response surface methodology (RSM) allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the interaction between key variables, resulting in a significant improvement in erythritol production. The scale-up experiments further validated the process, indicating its potential for industrial application. The findings of this study contribute to the development of sustainable and efficient bioprocesses for erythritol production, meeting the growing demand for natural sweeteners in the market.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings contribute significantly to the development of a sustainable and efficient bioprocess for erythritol production. By enhancing the yield and efficiency of erythritol biosynthesis using *Yarrowia lipolytica* MTCC 9519 this research supports the growing demand for natural and low-calorie sweeteners, aligning with current trends in healthier food production and sustainability. Future work should focus on further scaling up the process and exploring additional optimization strategies, such as genetic engineering of *Y. lipolytica* to further enhance erythritol production and reduce production costs.

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