A Potential Food-Grade Cloning Vector for *Streptococcus thermophilus* That Uses Cadmium Resistance as the Selectable Marker

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A potential food-grade cloning vector, pND919, was constructed and transformed into *S. thermophilus* ST3-1, a plasmid-free strain. The vector contains DNAs from two different food-approved organisms, *Streptococcus thermophilus* and *Lactococcus lactis*. The 5.0-kb pND919 is a derivative of the cloning vector pND918 (9.3 kb) and was constructed by deletion of the 4.3-kb region of pND918 which contained DNA from non-food-approved organisms. pND919 carries a heterologous native cadmium resistance selectable marker from *L. lactis* M71 and expresses the Cd' phenotype in *S. thermophilus* transformants. With the *S. thermophilus* replicon derived from the shuttle vector pND913, pND919 is able to replicate in the two *S. thermophilus* industrial strains tested, ST3-1 and ST4-1. Its relatively high retention rate in *S. thermophilus* further indicates its usefulness as a potential food-grade cloning vector. To our knowledge, this is the first report of a replicative potential food-grade vector for the industrially important organism *S. thermophilus*.

**Lactic acid bacteria are used as starter cultures for dairy fermentations. For decades, mesophilic *Lactococcus* strains have been the focus of research. More recently, *Streptococcus thermophilus* has gained increasing attention as an important industrial species and is being used in production of yogurt and some cheeses. Inevitably, with expanding dairy fermentation activities, the problem of bacteriophage infection of this particular starter species has intensified, with the majority of the phages isolated from *S. thermophilus* cultures classified as lytic phages rather than lysogenic phages (2). As a result, precautions have been implemented to avoid phage infection, including genetic manipulation to generate phage-resistant *S. thermophilus* starter cultures (16).

To date only a limited number of phage defense mechanisms have been reported for *S. thermophilus* (16). In contrast a large number have been characterized for *Lactococcus lactis* (3), and it is possible that the lactococcal phage defense systems could be used to provide phage resistance in *S. thermophilus*. To facilitate this, the construction of appropriate cloning vectors for *S. thermophilus* is necessary. While plasmids in *S. thermophilus* have been characterized (15), their development into food-grade vectors has not yet been realized. The lack of effective selectable markers in *S. thermophilus* has contributed to the lack of progress. With the increasing problems of phage infection in *S. thermophilus*, the development of suitable cloning vectors capable of delivering lactococcal phage resistance mechanisms to *S. thermophilus* is needed.

The approach adopted to construct a potential food-grade cloning vector for *S. thermophilus* was to use the *S. thermophilus* replicon in pND913 (15). A number of selectable markers have been characterized and used in *Lactococcus*. These include the nisin resistance gene (5), the lacF gene involved in lactose utilization (8), the pepN nonsense suppressor gene of the purine synthetic pathway (4), and the sucrose utilization genes (12). Recently, lactococcal heavy metal resistance determinants, such as cadmium resistance (Cd') and copper resistance, have been used as food-grade markers in *L. lactis* (7). The usefulness of the Cd' system, isolated from *L. lactis* strain M71 and encoded by the *cadA* and *cadC* genes, has been demonstrated with *L. lactis* strains (7).

In this paper, we report the construction of a 5.0-kb potential food-grade cloning vector for *S. thermophilus*. The construct contains an *S. thermophilus* replicon and the Cd' selectable marker from *Lactococcus*; therefore, the construct contains DNAs from two different groups of food-approved organisms. The usefulness of this potential food-grade vector was indicated by its ability to replicate in two *S. thermophilus* industrial strains, ST3-1 and ST4-1.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Bacterial strains, plasmids, and culture conditions.** The strains and plasmids used in this study are listed in Table 1. *Escherichia coli* cultures used for plasmid isolation and cloning were propagated at 37°C in Luria-Bertani medium (14). *L. lactis* cultures were incubated at 30°C in M17 medium (17) supplemented with 0.5% (wt/vol) glucose (M17G). *S. thermophilus* strains were propagated at 37°C anaerobically in M17 medium supplemented with 0.5% (wt/vol) lactose (M17L). When appropriate, the following selective agents were added: for *E. coli*, 100 μg of carbenicillin per ml; for *L. lactis*, 5 μg of erythromycin per ml or 0.5 mM cadmium chloride (CdCl₂); and for *S. thermophilus*, 3 μg of erythromycin per ml or 0.3 mM CdCl₂.

**Plasmid isolation.** *E. coli* plasmid extraction was done as described by Sambrook et al. (14). For plasmid isolation from *L. lactis* transformants, the methods of Anderson and McKay (1) were used. Isolation of *S. thermophilus* plasmids was as described by O’Sullivan and Klaenhammer (10); however, rather than using overnight culture as recommended for plasmid isolation from the *L. lactis* hosts, a log-phase culture was used for plasmid extraction from the *S. thermophilus* strains.

**Molecular cloning techniques and PCR.** General procedures for molecular cloning were performed as described by Sambrook et al. (14). PCR was used for the amplification of the 2.9-kb cadA-cadC region encoding the lactococcal Cd' marker, with pND312 (a modified version of native lactococcal plasmid pND302) (7) as a template. Primer cadR-L (7) was used as the forward primer, and its sequence is 5'-CGTGGATCCATACTTGAAAGCAC-3'. Primer cadB was designed for the backward primer, and its sequence is 5'-CGATCATTTTCGT
The sequence comparison was performed by the Australian Genomic Catalyst 800 robotic workstation. The sequence of the Cdr determinant was amplified by PCR using primer pND913. To enhance the cloning procedure, the fragment of the Cdr determinant was amplified so that it harbored an HI restriction site generated by the cdR-L forward primer and BamHI reverse primer. The amplification procedure was as described by Liu et al. (7).

**Transformation.** E. coli cells were transformed as described by Sambrook et al. (14). For L. lactis cultures, LM2030 cells were transformed by electroporation with a Bio-Rad Pulse Controller and Gene-Pulser as described by Powell et al. (13). S. thermophilus was transformed by electroporation as described by Holo and Nes (6).

**Characterization of pND919 in S. thermophilus.** The stability of pND919 was monitored for 30 generations. Thirty generations is more than the number of generations required to prepare an inoculum and then grow the culture in commercial fermentors. For segregational stability, transformants were incubated in M17L broth in the absence of any selective pressure. At the end of this growth period, transformed colonies were plated on nonselective medium and then patched onto selective medium, and the percent plasmid loss was calculated. The presence of a plasmid of the expected size in selected transformants was confirmed by plasmid isolation.

For structural stability of pND919, a similar procedure was used. However, the selective agent was added to the growth medium. After 30 generations of growth, plasmid extraction was performed on the transformants prior to examination by gel electrophoresis and comparison with plasmids extracted at generation 0.

**Nucleotide sequencing and analysis.** Both DNA strands of the junction region of pND919 were sequenced. Sequencing reactions were set up with purified pND919 as the double-stranded template and two primers (primer 1, 5’-CAAGCAAGGATGGCCATGGAGATCTGCG-3’; primer 2, 5’-AAGCAGGCAAAAGCCTGC-3’). Each of the primers was designed according to the known sequences of the lactococcal Cdr determinant in pND312 and pND919 as the double-stranded template and two primers (primer 1, 5’-CAAGCAAGGATGGCCATGGAGATCTGCG-3’; primer 2, 5’-AAGCAGGCAAAAGCCTGC-3’).

Restriction analysis and gel electrophoresis revealed that the Carb’ transformants contained plasmid pND918, which was 9.2 kb in size. Restriction digestion showed that pND918 yielded the 2.9- and 6.4-kb fragments on double digestion with XbaI and BamHI and a 9.2-kb DNA fragment on digestion with XbaI. Based on these results, the cloning of the Cdr determinant into pND913 was confirmed (data not shown).

**Transfer of pND918 to L. lactis and S. thermophilus.** To examine the expression of the Cdr determinant from pND918, electrotransformation of L. lactis LM2030 with pND918 was performed with the plasmid extracted from E. coli Carb’ transformants. A transformation efficiency of $6 \times 10^3$ transformants/µg of DNA was achieved when selection was for erythromycin resistance (Em’). Patching of these Em’ transformants onto M17G plates supplemented with glucose and Cd resulted in the identification of Em’ Cd’ colonies. Plasmid profiles and restriction analysis confirmed that pND918 had remained unchanged during transfer to L. lactis LM2030 (data not shown). pND918 prepared from L. lactis LM2030 was then used to electropropagate S. thermophilus ST3-1. For comparison, another preparation of pND918 from E. coli was transformed into S. thermophilus ST3-1 under the same conditions. A transformation efficiency of approximately $10^4$ transformants/µg of DNA was achieved with a positive control, pGKV210 (11). No transformation was observed when 1 µg of the E. coli plasmid preparation was used. Transformation with 10 ng of pND918 prepared from L. lactis produced 95 colonies on M17L-erythromycin plates and 16 colonies on M17L-Cd plates. Plasmid isolation from two Em’ and three Cd’ clones revealed the presence of plasmid pND918. Based on these results, the lactococcal Cdr’ system as encoded by pND918 was shown to be expressed in S. thermophilus. Furthermore, the inability of S.
FIG. 1. Construction of the food-grade cloning vector pND919 for *S. thermophilus*.
thermophilus to be transformed by pND918 prepared from E. coli is of interest.

The food-grade cloning vector pND919 was obtained by modification of pND918. To achieve this, the DNA components from non-food-approved organisms were removed from pND918 by KpnI digestion and self-ligation (Fig. 1). Electrottransformation into S. thermophilus ST3-1 was performed with ligation mixtures prepared from pND918 isolated from E. coli JM109, L. lactis LM0230, and S. thermophilus ST3-1. Similar to the results for pND918, S. thermophilus ST3-1 transformants were not obtained from the ligation mixture derived from E. coli, even though 2 µg of DNA was used to electroporate the host. By contrast, electrottransformation of S. thermophilus with 0.7 µg of ligation mixture derived from L. lactis or S. thermophilus generated 125 and 154 Cd' transformed colonies, respectively. Plasmid isolation and restriction analysis with KpnI indicated the presence of the 5.0-kb pND919.

The junction region of pND919 represents the point where the non-food-grade component was separated from the food-grade component of pND918; it spans the region of the cadA-cadC insert and pND913. Two sequencing reactions were set up with purified pND919 as the double-stranded template and two primers. The sequences obtained were analyzed and compared with the databases from WebAngis. Examination of the sequences with the aid of the BESTFIT program revealed 100% similarity with pND312 and pND913.

Stability of pND919 in S. thermophilus. The segregational and structural stabilities of pND919 in S. thermophilus were examined. For comparison, pND913 was included, as well as pGKV210. pGKV210 was included because it has been reported to be functional and stable in various S. thermophilus strains (11). pND919 was found to be relatively stable. The plasmid loss was 19% after 30 generations of growth without selection. For plasmids pGKV210 and pND913, the plasmid losses were 82.5 and 35.9%, respectively.

Transformants were incubated in M17L broth in the presence of cadmium (pND919) and erythromycin (pND913 and pGKV210) for approximately 30 generations. At the end of the growth period, single colonies were obtained by streaking the liquid cultures onto appropriate M17L selective plates. After plating, plasmid extraction was performed with selected colonies. The plasmid preparations were examined by gel electrophoresis and compared with those extracted from generation 0. As illustrated in Fig. 2, pND913, pND919, and pGKV210 were stably maintained for about 30 generations, as no obvious alteration in the size of any plasmids could be observed.

Electrotransformation of pND919 into S. thermophilus ST4-1. The industrial strain S. thermophilus ST4-1 was electrottransformed with 8 ng of plasmid extracted from S. thermophilus ST3-1 and plated on M17L plus erythromycin (3 µg per ml) and M17L plus Cd (0.3 mM). For comparison, pND913 and pND918 were included. Em' colonies were obtained with pND913 and pND918 and not with pND919, while Cd' colonies were obtained with pND918 and pND919. The transformation efficiencies of pND913, pND918, and pND919 were 2 × 10^5, 3 × 10^4, and 1 × 10^4 transformants/µg of DNA, respectively.

DISCUSSION

In this study, a potential food-grade vector, pND919, for S. thermophilus was constructed by using an S. thermophilus replicon together with the lactococcal cadA and cadC genes. The encoded Cd' determinant was shown to confer resistance to CdCl₂ in S. thermophilus. The Cd' system has previously been shown to be a useful food-grade selectable marker in lactococcal strains (7). In S. thermophilus, sensitive strains are generally inhibited in media containing 0.3 to 0.5 mM CdCl₂. Hence, this marker is considered to be a good selectable marker in S. thermophilus.

That pND919 is a potential food-grade cloning vector for S. thermophilus has been demonstrated in this study. The stability of vectors in any transformants is an important issue, especially if the vector needs to be stable enough to withstand the production process. To examine this requirement, the segregational and structural stabilities of pND919 in S. thermophilus ST3-1 were investigated. The results of the stability studies indicated that pND919 is both structurally and segregationally (without selection) relatively stable for approximately 30 generations. In industrial use, a fermentation takes approximately 21 generations. pND919 was also shown to replicate in a second S. thermophilus industrial strain (ST4-1).

In this study, plasmid DNA extracted from E. coli was unable to transform S. thermophilus. Successful S. thermophilus ST3-1 transformation was observed only when plasmid DNA was prepared from either L. lactis LM0230 or S. thermophilus ST3-1. It is possible that E. coli DNA was recognized as foreign while L. lactis and S. thermophilus DNA was recognized as self.

Plasmid pND919, which expresses Cd' in S. thermophilus, has the potential to be used in the food industry. The expression of Cd' in S. thermophilus transformants not only is an innovative approach but also should be effective enough to be useful as a food-grade selectable marker in S. thermophilus strains that have low natural cadmium resistance. The generation of such a potential food-grade vector, therefore, creates an opportunity to enhance bacteriophage defense systems in S.
thermophilus by transferring the characterized lactococcal phage defense systems to S. thermophilus.

REFERENCES