Nitrogen-fixing and cellulose-producing 
Gluconacetobacter kombuchae sp. nov., isolated from Kombucha tea

Debasree Dutta and Ratan Gachhui

Department of Life Science & Biotechnology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata 700032, West Bengal, India

A few members of the family Acetobacteraceae are cellulose-producers, while only six members fix nitrogen. Bacterial strain RG3T, isolated from Kombucha tea, displays both of these characteristics. A high bootstrap value in the 16S rRNA gene sequence-based phylogenetic analysis supported the position of this strain within the genus Gluconacetobacter, with Gluconacetobacter hansenii LMG 1527T as its nearest neighbour (99.1% sequence similarity). It could utilize ethanol, fructose, arabinose, glycerol, sorbitol and mannitol, but not galactose or xylose, as sole sources of carbon. Single amino acids such as L-alanine, L-cysteine and L-threonine served as carbon and nitrogen sources for growth of strain RG3T. Strain RG3T produced cellulose in both nitrogen-free broth and enriched medium. The ubiquinone present was Q-10 and the DNA base composition was 55.8 mol% G+C. It exhibited low values of 5.2–27.77% DNA–DNA relatedness to the type strains of related gluconacetobacters, which placed it within a separate taxon, for which the name Gluconacetobacter kombuchae sp. nov. is proposed, with the type strain RG3T (=LMG 23726T =MTCC 6913T).

Endophytic bacteria colonize the internal tissues of the host plant for mutual benefit. The nitrogen-fixing endophyte Gluconacetobacter diazotrophicus was found to be associated with sugar cane, pineapple, Cameroon grass, sweet potato, mango and banana (Muthukumarasamy et al., 2002), while Gluconacetobacter azotocaptans and Gluconacetobacter johannae inhabit coffee plants (Fuentes-Ramirez et al., 2001); these organisms might provide host plants with useful fixed nitrogen and growth stimulants (Lee et al., 2001; Muthukumarasamy et al., 2002). Based on the strikingly similar high-sugar and low-pH environments presented by the habitats of sugar cane and Kombucha tea (Blanc, 1996), we explored the bacterial flora of Kombucha tea and isolated a nitrogen-fixing strain, Acetobacter nitrogenifigens RG1T (Dutta & Gachhui, 2006), and another nitrogen-fixing and cellulose-producing strain, RG3T, belonging to the family Acetobacteraceae.

The family Acetobacteraceae has been divided into 10 genera: Acetobacter, Gluconacetobacter, Gluconobacter, Acidomonas (Yamada et al., 1997), Asaia (Yamada et al., 2000), Kozakia (Lisdiyanti et al., 2002), Saccharibacter (Jojima et al., 2004), Swaminathania (Loganathan & Nair, 2004), Neoasaia (Yukphan et al., 2005) and Granulibacter (Greenberg et al., 2006). Only six members of the family, G. diazotrophicus (Gillis et al., 1989), G. johannae (Fuentes-Ramirez et al., 2001), G. azotocaptans (Fuentes-Ramirez et al., 2001), Acetobacter peroxydans (Muthukumarasamy et al., 2005), Swaminathania salitolerans (Loganathan & Nair, 2004) and Acetobacter nitrogenifigens (Dutta & Gachhui, 2006), are known to fix nitrogen. The genus Gluconacetobacter comprises 15 species with validly published names at present, differentiated on the basis of DNA–DNA relatedness, phylogenetic relationships and morphological characteristics. Isolation of strain RG3T from Kombucha tea is the first instance of a strain within the family having both nitrogen-fixing and cellulose-producing activity. We present morphological, biochemical and genetic evidence that indicates that RG3T represents a novel nitrogen-fixing species within the genus Gluconacetobacter.

Kombucha tea is a fermented tea that contains an association of yeast and bacteria. A jelly-like membrane floats in the nutrient solution of tea and sugar exposed to oxygen. At the right temperature, it multiplies continuously. It first spreads over the entire surface of the tea, and then thickens. Kombucha tea was subcultured every 7–10 days by mixing 10% of old soup with 10% sucrose dissolved in brewed black tea. After teasing the mat apart in the soup, aliquots of Kombucha mat suspension were spread on LGI agar plates (0.06% KH2PO4, 0.02% K2HPO4, 0.02% MgSO4, 0.002% CaCl2, 0.001% FeCl3, 0.0002% Na2MoO4, 10% sucrose, pH 4.5; Cavalcante & Dobereiner, 1988) containing 150 mg cycloheximide l−1 (Jimenez-Salgado...
et al., 1997) and 150 mg nystatin l−1. Plates were incubated at 30 °C for 5 days. Repeated streaking on LGI plates, which contain no combined nitrogen, purified the bacterial isolate. Gas-tight vials of LGI medium inoculated with bacteria (under a microaerophilic environment, without shaking) were assayed for acetylene reduction activity (Stal, 1988). Nitrogenase-positive isolates were selected for further characterization. Strain RG3T, a nitrogen-fixing bacterial strain that exhibited cellulose-producing ability even in nitrogen-free LGI broth, was isolated.

Strain RG3T produced cellulose when grown in HS medium (Hestrin & Schramm, 1954) under stationary as well as shaking culture conditions at 30 °C after incubation for 3 days. The cellulotic character of the pellicle was confirmed by boiling the pellicles with a dilute NaOH solution (Forng et al., 1989; Navarro & Komaga, 1999). The polymer was a simple carbohydrate in nature, as indicated by the greenish-blue colour of the supernatant with o-toluidine. In acid-hydrolysed bacterial pellicle samples, the amount of reducing sugars released was found to be comparable to the amount of glucose residues estimated by using glucose oxidase. Thus, the pellicle had repetitive glucose units. Liberation of glucose units upon enzymatic digestion of the pellicle with cellulase confirmed it to be composed of cellulose.

Reference strains (Gluconacetobacter hansenii) JCM 11196T, a gift of Y. Nakagawa and Y. Yamada, Gluconacetobacter intermedium LMG 18909T, Gluconacetobacter europaeus LMG 1518T, Gluconacetobacter oboediens LMG 18849T and Gluconacetobacter swingsii LMG 22125T, from the BCCM/LMG, and Gluconacetobacter xylinus JCM 7644T from the JCM) were grown in different media according to the instructions of the culture collections. Colony morphology was examined on LGI agar plates and on potato agar plates containing 10% sucrose. Various phenotypic and morphological characters were tested using standard techniques described previously (Franke et al., 1999; Schüller et al., 2000; Dellaglio et al., 2005; Fuentes-Ramirez et al., 2001). Isoprenoid quinones of the isolate were extracted with chloroform/methanol (2:1, v/v) and purified by TLC on silica gel 60 F254 plates (20 cm; Merck) by using benzene as the developing solvent. Quinones recovered from the TLC plates were dissolved in acetone and analysed by HPLC (Lu et al., 1999). The HPLC system was equipped with a reversed-phase column [Luna SU C18 (2) 100A, 250 × 4.6 mm; Phenomenex] and a mixture of methanol and isopropanol (2:1, v/v) was used as the mobile phase at a flow rate of 1 ml min−1. Types of quinone were identified by absorption at 275 nm and compared with coenzyme Q-9 and coenzyme Q-10 standards from Sigma-Aldrich. Ubiquinone Q-10 was present in strain RG3T, in agreement with previous observations of the presence of this ubiquinone type in the genus Gluconacetobacter (Cleenwerck et al., 2002).

A 1442 bp fragment of the 16S rRNA gene was amplified by PCR with bacteria-specific primers fD1 and rD1 (Weisburg et al., 1991) using Taq polymerase and genomic DNA from RG3T as the template. The nucleotide sequence showed the following levels of similarity to sequences from strains of the genus Gluconacetobacter after performing similarity searches with FASTA (ungapped): 99.1% with G. hansenii LMG 1527T, 99.0% with G. entanii LTH 4560T, 98.6% with G. rheticus DST GL02T, 98.5% with G. swingsi DST GL01T, 98.3% with G. xylinus JCM 7644T and G. europaeus JK2, 98.2% with G. saccharivorans LMG 1582T, 98.1% with G. oboediens LTH 2460T, G. intermedius TF2T and G. natacolum LMG 1536T, 96.7% with G. diazotrophicus LMG 7603T, 96.6% with G. azotocaptans CFN-Ca54T, 96.5% with G. johnnae CFN-Cf55T and G. liquefaciens LMG 1382T and 96.4% with G. sacchari IF 2–6. The phylogenetic tree was deduced using MEGA version 3.1 (Kumar et al., 2004) software after multiple alignment with 16S rRNA gene sequences of other acetic acid bacteria with CLUSTAL W (Thompson et al., 1994). Distances (distance options according to the Kimura two-parameter model) and clustering with the neighbour-joining method were determined by using bootstrap values (Felsenstein, 1985) based on 100 replications. As evident from the tree (Fig. 1), the species of this genus are subgrouped phylogenetically into two clusters, comprising nitrogen-fixers such as G. diazotrophicus and cellulose-producers such as G. xylinus, G. swingsi, G. rheticus and G. natacolum. The novel strain RG3T, which exhibits both these characteristics, clustered with the ‘cellulose-producing’ group, along the subbranch formed by G. hansenii and G. entanii.

Strain RG3T differed biochemically from the phylogenetically closely related species of the genus Gluconacetobacter (Table 1). It could be differentiated from G. hansenii and G. entanii, its phylogenetically closest neighbours, in utilizing sorbitol as a sole source of carbon. Additionally, RG3T could be differentiated from G. hansenii by the non-utilization of ethanol, mannitol and sucrose as carbon sources and from G. entanii by growth in the absence of acetic acid and utilization of D-mannitol as a carbon source. The major difference between RG3T and the related ‘cellulose-producing’ gluconacetobacters is the absence of nitrogen-fixing behaviour in the remaining species. Of the genes responsible for nitrogen fixation, the structural genes nifHDK of the nitrogenase complex are the most important. A 536 bp region encoding dinitrogenase reductase, nifH, was amplified from RG3T using degenerate primers 19F and 407R (Franke et al., 1998) and sequenced, confirming the presence of the nifH gene in RG3T.

To determine the genomic relatedness of the new isolate, dot-blot hybridization experiments were carried out with DIG-labelled DNA as described previously (Labrenz et al., 2000) using the detection kit from Roche Applied Sciences following the manufacturer’s instructions. Colorimetric quantification of dot intensities was done using the Molecular Analyst software (Bio-Rad) by determining mean pixel densities in circles of equal size. The genomic DNA probe was prepared from strain RG3T; digested with...
EcoRI and separated on a 0.7% agarose gel. Total DNA digests were transferred from gels to nylon membrane by Southern blotting. Hybridization was performed at 75°C for 16 h and the membrane was washed under high-stringency conditions (twice with 2× SSC/0.1% SDS at room temperature for 10 min, once with 0.1× SSC/0.1% SDS at 75°C for 15 min). Low levels of genomic DNA relatedness (DNA–DNA hybridization values of less than 30%) were observed. Table 1. Differential characteristics between strain RG3T and closely related species of the genus *Gluconacetobacter*

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<td>NR</td>
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<td>Growth and pellicle formation in LGI medium</td>
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<td>Cellulose production</td>
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<td>59.9</td>
<td>55–63</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>61</td>
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**Fig. 1.** Phylogenetic relationships based on 16S rRNA gene sequences of acetic acid bacteria including strain RG3T and related members of the family *Acetobacteraceae*. Numerals at nodes indicate bootstrap values derived from 100 replications. GenBank accession numbers are indicated in parentheses. Bar, 2 substitutions per 100 nucleotides.
observed between strain RG3\(^T\) and its phylogenetically closest relatives; DNA–DNA relatedness values of 24.8 % (with *G. hansenii* JCM 7643\(^T\)), 21.8 % (*G. swingsii* LMG 22125\(^T\)), 27.7 % (*G. xylinus* JCM 7644\(^T\)), 24.6 % (*G. europaeus* LMG 1518\(^T\)), 5.2 % (*G. oboediens* LMG 18849\(^T\)) and 23.4 % (*G. intermedius* LMG 18909\(^T\)) were obtained.

The limitations of 16S rRNA gene sequencing for the differentiation of closely related species have been documented (Fox *et al*., 1992), but a DNA–DNA reassociation level below 70 % indicates a distinct species (Stackebrandt & Goebel, 1994). Although the 16S rRNA gene sequence similarity levels were greater than 97 %, low levels (below 30 %) of DNA relatedness were found among the closely related *Gluconacetobacter* species studied. In view of the low physiological, biochemical, phylogenetic and genetic similarities among members of the genus *Gluconacetobacter*, we recommend that strain RG3\(^T\) should be assigned to a novel species of the genus *Gluconacetobacter*. We propose the name *Gluconacetobacter kombuchae* sp. nov. for strain RG3\(^T\) isolated from Kombucha tea.

**Description of *Gluconacetobacter kombuchae* sp. nov.**

*Gluconacetobacter kombuchae* (kom.bu’cha) N.L. gen. fem. n. *kombuchae* from Kombucha, a kind of fermented tea).

Cells are straight rods, approximately 2.0–3.0 µm long and 0.1–0.2 µm wide, and occur singly or in bunches. Gram-negative, motile with polar flagellation, catalase-positive and oxidase-negative. Growth occurs on nitrogen-free LGI plates at 30 and 37 °C and in LGI broth under microaerophilic conditions with formation of a cellulosic pellicle on the surface. Colonies grown on LGI plates are smooth, round, dull, dry, white and opaque, 0.5–1.0 mm in diameter after incubation for 5 days. Dark-yellow colonies are formed on LGI agar supplemented with 0.001 % bromothymol blue. Colonies on potato agar are light brown after 5 days of incubation, but the intensity increases after 10 days. The type strain is aerobic and fixes atmospheric nitrogen microaerobically. It oxidizes ethanol to acetic acid, turning EYC or GYC opaque plates transparent, and overoxidizes acetate and lactate to CO\(_2\) and water. L-Alanine supports growth, as well as the formation of a pellicle, as the sole source of carbon and nitrogen in LGI broth. Can utilize the different carbon sources such as D-arabinose, D-mannitol, D-sorbitol and glycerol, but not D-galactose or D-xylene, and can grow on 30 % sucrose and 30 % glucose. Formation of a cellulosic pellicle is prevalent in the presence of almost all the general carbon sources used except sorbitol and glyconate. Can not utilize D-cellobiose, maltose or lactose in LGI medium for growth. The ubiquinone present is of the type Q-10 and the DNA G+C content of the type strain is 55.8 mol%.

The type strain is strain RG3\(^T\) (=LMG 23726\(^T\)=MTCC 6913\(^T\)), isolated from Kombucha tea.

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**References**


