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1 **Biosystems Design of *Corynebacterium glutamicum* for Bio-Production**

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22 **Abstract**

23 *Corynebacterium glutamicum*, a natural glutamate-producing bacterium adopted
24 for industrial production of amino acids, has been extensively explored recently
25 for high-level biosynthesis of amino acid derivatives, bulk chemicals such as organic
26 acids and short-chain alcohols, aromatics, and natural products including
27 polyphenols and terpenoids. Here, we review the recent advances with a focus on
28 biosystem design principles, metabolic characterization and modeling, omics
29 analysis, utilization of non-model feedstock, emerging CRISPR tools for
30 *Corynebacterium* strain engineering, biosensors, and novel strains of *C. glutamicum*.
31 Future research directions for developing *C. glutamicum* cell factories are also discussed.

32

33 **Keywords**

34 biosystem design, CRISPR, metabolic models, polyphenol, terpenoid.

35 **Introduction**

36 The growing concerns on climate change and energy supply have driven fast
37 development of microbial manufacturing of diverse bioproducts from renewable
38 resources [1-3]. One of the most commonly used industrial microbes is *Corynebacterium*
39 *glutamicum*, a gram-positive and nonpathogenic bacterium adopted industrially for the
40 production of amino acids. *C. glutamicum* demonstrates several physiological properties
41 advantageous to fermentative production, such as high rates of sugar consumption under
42 either aerobic or anaerobic conditions regardless of cell density, high tolerance to osmotic
43 pressure and various chemicals (including the final products), and capability of
44 simultaneously utilizing mixtures of sugars without carbon catabolite repression [4].
45 Recently, the product portfolio of this host platform has been expanded substantially to
46 cover organic acids, short-chain alcohols, phenolics, and plant natural products (**Figure**
47 **1**), attributed to the elucidation of more physiological information, the establishment of
48 genome-scale models, and the development of sophisticated genetic manipulation tools.
49 In this review, we summarize the latest progress on the engineering of *C. glutamicum*,
50 with a focus on biomanufacturing, utilization of various substrates, emerging approaches
51 of gene editing and metabolic regulation, metabolic modeling and omics analysis, and
52 novel strains of *C. glutamicum*.

53 **Production of primary metabolites, amino acids and amino acid derivatives**

54 *C. glutamicum* has been applied industrially to produce 17 natural amino acids
55 (except glycine, methionine and aspartate [5-8]) as well as amino acid derivatives such as
56 5-aminovalerate and polyglutamic acid (PGA) (**Table 1**) [9-11]. The general principles of
57 strain engineering include: (1) introduction of the biosynthetic pathway consisting of

58 heterologous genes, (2) balancing of the amino acid biosynthetic pathway and the
59 downstream pathway, and (3) deletion or suppression of competing pathways. For
60 example, the heterologous pathway involving genes *davTBA* responsible for
61 aminovaleramide formation from lysine was overexpressed in a lysine-producing *C.*
62 *glutamicum* strain, followed by expression of various aldehyde reductase orthologues for
63 the generation of 5-hydroxyvaleric acid. The resulting strain achieved a titer of 52 g/L in
64 fed-batch fermentation [12]. Another example is the production of glutaric acid. The L-
65 lysine catabolic pathway from *P. putida* was expressed in *C. glutamicum*, converting L-
66 lysine to glutaric acid, with a titer of 105 g/L [13]. Moreover, *C. glutamicum* metabolism
67 has been studied by ¹³C-Metabolic Flux Analysis (MFA). The metabolic knowledge led to
68 heterologous expression of transhydrogenase and site-directed mutagenesis of pentose
69 phosphate pathway enzymes to promote co-factor balance and L-methionine production
70 [14]. In addition to amino acids and their derivatives, *C. glutamicum* is an excellent host to
71 synthesize various organic acids (i.e., lactate, succinate, pyruvate, and α -ketoglutarate)
72 [15,16] and short-chain alcohols (**Table 1**) [17].

73 **Biosynthesis of natural products**

74 *C. glutamicum* is a GRAS (generally regarded as safe) microbe that can produce
75 pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals. It has a strong shikimate pathway for the synthesis of
76 phenylalanine and tyrosine, which are primary building blocks for polyphenol
77 biosynthesis. Polyphenols usually exhibit antimicrobial properties. *C. glutamicum* is
78 naturally more resistant to polyphenols than *E. coli*, and can even metabolize polyphenols
79 as carbon sources under certain conditions. As a consequence, *C. glutamicum* has been
80 recently engineered to produce diverse subgroups of flavonoid compounds including

81 naringenin, kaempferol, eriodictyol, and cyanidin 3-*O*-glucoside [18,19]. Moreover, *C.*
82 *glutamicum* has been employed to produce aromatics, such as indole, protocatechuate,
83 4-hydroxybenzoate and 4-aminobenzoate (**Figure 1**) [4]. *C. glutamicum* has also been
84 used to synthesize various terpenoids, including astaxanthin, valencene, and lycopene
85 [20]. However, its performance for the biosynthesis of natural products is generally lower
86 than those obtained in *E. coli*, *S. cerevisiae*, or *Y. lipolytica* [21]. One possible reason is
87 that enzyme expression in *C. glutamicum* leads to insoluble inclusion bodies. To improve
88 the expression of heterologous proteins, the fusion of a soluble peptide tag has been
89 shown to be an effective approach [18].

90 **Utilization of cellulosic sugars and non-model feedstock**

91 *C. glutamicum* can use glucose, sucrose and fructose but not pentoses [22,23].
92 Recent research to expand the spectrum of *C. glutamicum* carbon sources targets
93 methanol, chitin, pentoses (xylose and arabinose) from hemicellulosic hydrolysates,
94 galactose and lactose that are abundant in whey-based fermentation media, and glycerol
95 that is a major by-product from the biodiesel industry [24] (**Figure 1**). The relevant
96 strategies for strain engineering toward sugar utilization contain adaptive evolution,
97 introduction of sugar transporters from other microbes, activation of cryptic transporters,
98 and expression of sugar pathway genes for subsequent catabolism [25]. *C. glutamicum*
99 contains an endogenous yet silent glycerol-catabolizing pathway. Earlier attempts
100 regarding glycerol utilization in this bacterium involved activation of the endogenous
101 pathway or introduction of heterologous pathways; however, these methods only led to
102 limited success [26]. A recent study optimized the expression of the heterologous genes
103 involving *glpF* (encoding aquaglyceroporin), *dhaD* (encoding glycerol dehydrogenase),

104 and *dhaK* (encoding ATP-dependent dihydroxyacetone kinase). The best strain achieved a
105 glycerol utilization rate of 1.34 g/g DCW/h and the maximum specific growth rate of
106 0.37 h⁻¹ with glycerol as the sole carbon source [26].

107 A consolidated process using starch as the feedstock has been achieved in *C.*
108 *glutamicum* that lacks hydrolases to decompose starch. Surface display of α -amylase
109 from *Streptococcus bovis* enabled the engineered *C. glutamicum* to degrade starch into
110 glucose, which is then metabolized to produce lysine [27,28]. On the other hand, a co-
111 culture approach has been applied. Through the division of labor [29], the partner strain
112 (α -amylase-producing *E. coli*) is designed to digest starch into glucose, whereas *C.*
113 *glutamicum* uses glucose to produce value-added chemicals [30].

114 Recently, new methods have been developed to depolymerize lignin [31]. While a
115 range of molecules can be released from lignin, aromatic molecules such
116 as *para*-coumarate and ferulate are natively catabolized by *C. glutamicum*
117 [32,33]. Therefore, lignocellulosic biomass could release both monomeric sugars and
118 aromatics as feedstock for this organism.

119 **New tools to engineer *C. glutamicum***

120 Traditional gene knockout or knockin in *C. glutamicum* uses allelic exchange
121 plasmids, which is a multi-step and overall inefficient process. Better gene modifications
122 can be achieved by CRISPR/Cas9 in conjunction with ssDNA-binding repair protein
123 RecT from *E. coli* (**Figure 2**) [34]. Adapting these techniques to *C. glutamicum*
124 has required some optimization; expressing *S. pyogenes* Cas9 alone can
125 generate double-strand breaks that are highly toxic to the cell, thus leading to a
126 low genome editing efficiency especially when Cas9 is expressed constitutively. In
contrast, Cas12a

127 (Cpf1) from *Francisella novicida* is non-toxic and highly efficient in
128 nucleotide modifications with the aid of single-stranded DNA. With Cas12a, a 5' PAM
129 (Protospacer Adjacent Motif) sequence 5'-NYTV-3' preceding a 21 bp targeting spacer
130 sequence can introduce double-strand breaks [35]. Inspired by this, similar
131 toolboxes have been developed for *C. glutamicum* genome editing through
132 optimized expression of guide RNA and Cas9, and coexpression of recombinases [36].
133 Another newly developed tool is the adenine/cytosine base editor. In this system, the
134 catalytically dead Cas9 is fused to a cytosine deaminase (CDA) or adenine
135 deaminase (AID), which enables base pair transition from C:G to T:A or from A:T
136 to G:C. Expression of the guide RNA and the fusion construct Cas9-CDA or Cas9-
137 AID triggers precise base editing in either the genome or the plasmid [37]. By
138 applying this tool to the sequences of ribosome-binding sites or promoter regions, the
139 pathway genes can be regulated in parallel and their expression levels can be
140 varied in a large range [37]. Moreover, the genome-targeting scope of such base
141 editors has been expanded by loosening the 3' PAM sequence requirements from
142 a 5'-NGG-3' to 5'-NG-3' using the Cas9 variants, thus providing 3.9-fold more
143 target loci for *C. glutamicum* gene modifications [36].

144 The CRISPR system has been investigated in the interference of gene expression
145 (CRISPRi) (**Figure 2**). By employing a catalytically-dead Cas9 endonuclease that binds
146 to one or several target sequences simultaneously with the aid of guide RNAs,
147 the expression of the target gene(s) can therefore be repressed or, in some cases,
148 activated [38]. For example, *C. glutamicum* was engineered for carotenoid
149 production and CRISPRi tested 74 genes involved in its central metabolism,
regulatory genes, and biosynthetic pathways. Such an effort led to the identification
of new target genes for

150 increased carotenoid bioproduction [39]. On the other hand, a synthetic small regulatory
151 RNA (sRNA)-based gene knockdown strategy has been developed in *C. glutamicum*
152 **(Figure 2)**. This system contains an RNA chaperone Hfq from *E. coli* and a rationally
153 designed sRNA consisting of the *E. coli* MicC (mRNA-interfering complementary OmpC)
154 scaffold and a target binding site. Upon expression in *C. glutamicum*, the sRNA binds to
155 the mRNA of the target genes, represses translation and enzyme synthesis, and regulates
156 the production of the target compounds [40].

157 Biosensors are useful in metabolic engineering. *C. glutamicum* contains many native
158 transcription factors that respond to amino acids to trigger the expression of exporters. In
159 addition, some endogenous regulatory proteins are responsive to native metabolites or
160 natural products [41,42]. For example, MarR (multiple antibiotic resistance
161 regulator)-type regulator CrtR, which represses the transcription of the promoter of the
162 *crt* operon (PcrtE) and its own gene (PcrtR), can sense intracellular geranylgeranyl
163 pyrophosphate (GGPP), and the CrtR/PcrtE switch can be used to screen
164 GGPP-overproducing strains for the production of carotenoids [42]. Recently, other
165 biosensors have been discovered in *C. glutamicum* such as ShiR, NCgl0581, and CgmR,
166 in addition to previously identified biosensors such as Lrp, GlxR, LysG [43]. They can be
167 applied in the screening of efficient producers or as a switch to modulate biosynthetic
168 pathways in a dynamic manner. For instance, various dynamic pathway regulation tools
169 have been reported, including quorum-sensing-based genetic circuits [44] and synthetic
170 metabolic switches (responsive to cell growth [26] or effector molecules such as
171 gluconate [45] and ferulic acid [46]).

172 **Multi-scale models and omics analysis to assist *C. glutamicum* engineering**

173 A DBTL (design-build-test-learn) cycle for *C. glutamicum* engineering involves: 1)
174 *design* pathways, 2) *build* genetic constructs, 3) *test* strains for desired traits, and 4) *learn*
175 new strategies for the next cycle of DBTL. In the design stage, metabolic modeling
176 predicts strain metabolism and identify biosynthesis bottlenecks. Several computational
177 design tools, including models and algorithms, have been developed to greatly accelerate
178 such a process. The recently updated genome-scale metabolic model of *C. glutamicum*,
179 i.e., model *iCW773* established for strain ATCC 13032, consists of 773 genes, 950
180 metabolites, and 1207 reactions [47]. This model coupled with flux balance analysis and
181 computational strain design could suggest the genetic interventions leading to hyaluronic
182 acid overproduction. Engineering efforts following such predictions led to 28.7 g/L of
183 hyaluronic acid (0.21-0.97 MDa) in fed-batch fermentation [48]. In another example,
184 model-guided metabolic engineering reconstructed the TCA cycle, blocked product
185 degradation, enhanced transport system, and improved gamma-aminobutyric acid
186 (GABA) production (achieving 23 g/L) [49]. Similarly, a pool influx kinetics approach
187 integrated dynamic ¹³C labeling with model-based analysis, leading to the identification
188 of key genes for improving L-histidine production in *C. glutamicum* [50]. Recently, an
189 enzyme-constrained metabolic model was developed [51]. This model improved the
190 prediction of *C. glutamicum* phenotypes and revealed the trade-off between biomass yield
191 and enzyme usage efficiency, which could guide strain engineering for L-lysine
192 production. In parallel to mechanistic models, data driven approaches (such as AI) have
193 been reported to facilitate successful DBTL cycles in other model organisms such as *E.*
194 *coli* [52] and *S. cerevisiae* [53]. Moreover, the Automated Recommendation Tool (ART)
195 for machine learning applications has been built to design synthetic biology components

196 (such as promoters) [54]. The same machine learning approaches may enhance *C.*
197 *glutamicum* strain development and biomanufacturing [55].

198 Omics analyses are important tools to facilitate DBTL strain development. In a
199 putrescine-producing *C. glutamicum* strain obtained via adaptive evolution, key
200 engineering loci were identified at the genetic level using whole genome sequencing and
201 at the protein level using comparative proteomics analysis. Subsequent engineering
202 efforts guided by the omics studies further increased the titer of putrescine by 30% [56].
203 In another study, transcriptomic and metabolomic data were analyzed to uncover the
204 association between cellular metabolism and the amino acid-producing phenotype,
205 suggesting that active pentose phosphate pathway and glyoxylate cycle are correlated
206 with efficient production of branched-chain amino acids [57]. On the other hand,
207 bio-production scale-up from laboratory flasks to industrial fermenters requires
208 multi-scale process analyses and optimizations. Thereby, various process models
209 have been built to predict *C. glutamicum* fermentations [58], to gain insights
210 into cell metabolism under bioreactor conditions [59], and to quantify bioreactor
211 mass transfer, hydromechanics, and power input [60]. Moreover, the integration of
212 process models with intracellular omics analysis under scale-down conditions provide
213 valuable perspectives on *C. glutamicum* physiologies inside inhomogeneous industrial
214 fermenters [61].

215 **Novel *C. glutamicum* strains for metabolic engineering applications**

216 While genomic tools and computational model development have reached maturity
217 for the ATCC 13032 type strain, differences between the type strain and other *C.*
218 *glutamicum* isolates remain an untapped reservoir of potential metabolic capacity.
A phylogenetic analysis of the 26 most common *C. glutamicum* isolates described in
the

219 literature identified 9 distinct groups with unique genomic islands and complex
220 polymorphisms that may be related to their specific amino acid secretion phenotypes [62].
221 These *C. glutamicum* isolates can have differing potentials to produce desirable
222 heterologous bioproducts. *N*-Acetylglucosamine (GlcNAc) is a monosaccharide with
223 potential applications in human health. Deng and coworkers introduced the
224 *Caenorhabditis elegans* *GNA1* gene (encoding glucosamine-6-phosphate
225 acetyltransferase) into different *C. glutamicum* isolates and detected GlcNAc titers at 3.0
226 g/L in the S9114 isolate. In contrast, ATCC 13032 produced 0.5 g/L GlcNAc. The
227 authors were able to adapt standard *C. glutamicum* gene modification tools in the S9114
228 isolate to further boost titers in batch mode to 6.9 g/L in rich media [63]. Similarly,
229 Banerjee and coworkers tested the production of a 5 gene isoprenol production pathway
230 in a transformation-improved Δmrr ATCC 13032 strain as well as in isolate BRC-JBEI
231 1.1.2, and found that isoprenol titers were at the lower detection limit (15 mg/L) in the
232 type strain but was twenty-fold higher in BRC-JBEI 1.1.2 [64]. Many (>500) genes in
233 these *C. glutamicum* isolates lack any functional characterization and have no known
234 homologs in other species, and this trend will likely hold as more genomes from related
235 *Corynebacteria* are identified from diverse microbiomes using high quality metagenomic
236 assembly approaches. Functional genomics approaches using parallel transposon
237 mutagenized mutant libraries that have been applied in other bacterial hosts will enable
238 the comparison of gene function across these isolates, providing insights into the
239 unknown genes harbored in these strains [65].

240

241 **Conclusions and Outlook for the Industry**

242 *C. glutamicum* has superior capability in the biosynthesis of diverse amino acids, organic
243 acids, short-chain alcohols, and their derivatives, many of which are bulk chemicals. The
244 fermentation facilities and bio-separation techniques for *C. glutamicum* factories have
245 been established, facilitating the commercialization of other compounds beyond
246 amino acids. Meanwhile, the development of omics analyses and high-
247 throughput cultivate/screen [66] is momentarily speeding strain characterization and
248 development. Additionally, the existence of a natural aromatic-degrading pathway
249 and the strong resistance to aromatic inhibitors in hemicellulosic hydrolysates
250 suggest promising potentials of *C. glutamicum* for the utilization of lignocellulose
251 to produce diverse chemicals [64]. On the other hand, it should be noted that *C.*
252 *glutamicum* is not the best chassis organism for all compounds. For example, natural
253 products are synthesized in this bacterium at low yields. To improve the functions of
254 the plant-derived pathways in *C. glutamicum*, several approaches can be employed,
255 including transporter engineering or cell wall remodeling to increase efflux of the
256 final products, enzyme modifications to enhance catalytic performances, and modular
257 pathway engineering [67,68]. In addition, advanced metabolic modeling and
258 emerging AI technologies may accelerate *C. glutamicum* engineering to synthesize
259 various high value products.

260

261 **Author contributions**

262 Writing – original draft preparation: JZ, ZZ; Writing – review & editing: ZX, TE,
263 AM, MK, YT.

264

Conflict of interest statement

265 The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal
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267

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Table 1. Recent achievements in *C. glutamicum*-based biosynthesis of compounds

Classification	Chemicals	Titer	Culture conditions	Reference
<i>Amino acids and derivatives</i>	L-Leucine	40 g/L	Fermenter	[69]
	5-Hydroxyvaleric acid	52 g/L	Fermenter	[12]
	5-Aminolevulinic acid	16.3 g/L	Fermenter	[70]
	Poly- γ -glutamic acid	21.3 g/L	Fermenter	[71]
	Ectoine	65.3 g/L	Fermenter	[72]
	Putrescine Indigoidine	12.5 g/L	Fermenter	[56]
	Spider silk protein	49.3 g/L	Fermenter	[73]
		0.56 g/L	Fermenter	[74]
Aromatics	Dipicolinic acid	2.5 g/L	Shake flask	[75]
	Protocatechuate	16 g/L	Fermenter	[76]
	Vanillin	0.31 g/L	Shake flask	[77]
Alcohols	1,3-Propanediol	98 g/L	Fermenter	[78]
	4-Amino-1-butanol	24 g/L	Fermenter	[79]
	Isoprenol (3-methyl-3-buten-1-ol)	1.25 g/L	Shake flask	[80]
	Isobutanol	20.75 g/L	Shake flask	[81]
Organic Acids	Succinate	94 g/L	Fermenter	[15]
	Muconic acid	85 g/L	Fermenter	[82]
	Adipic acid	35 μ g/L	Shake flask	[83]
Terpenoids	Astaxanthin	22 mg/L	Shake flask	[84]
	<i>CoQ10</i>	0.4 mg/L	Shake flask	[85]
Polyphenols	Cyanidin 3- <i>O</i> -glucoside	40 mg/L	Shake flask	[18]
	Naringenin	37 mg/L	Shake flask	[86]
	Resveratrol	158 mg/L	Shake flask	[86]
	Salidroside	9.7 g/L	Fermenter	[87]

Figure Legends

Figure 1. The portfolio of typical chemicals produced by engineered *C. glutamicum*. The chemicals include amino acids, their derivatives, organic acids, short-chain alcohols, fatty acids, aromatics, terpenoids, and polyphenols. The carbon sources for *C. glutamicum* include molasses and starch (common industrial fermentation media), hemicellulosic hydrolysates, xylose, methanol, glycerol, aromatics, etc.

Figure 2. The new genetic tools and models developed for metabolic engineering of *C. glutamicum*.

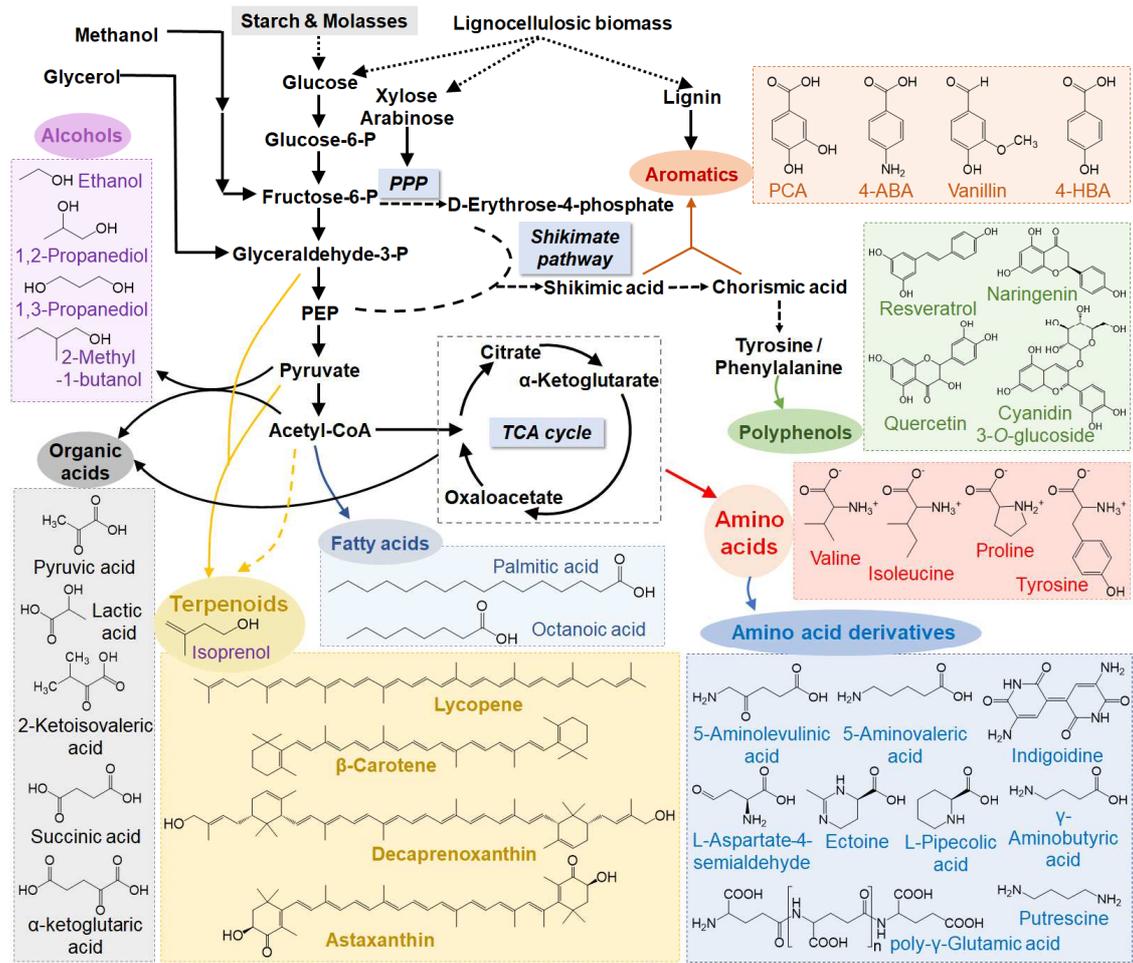


Figure 1

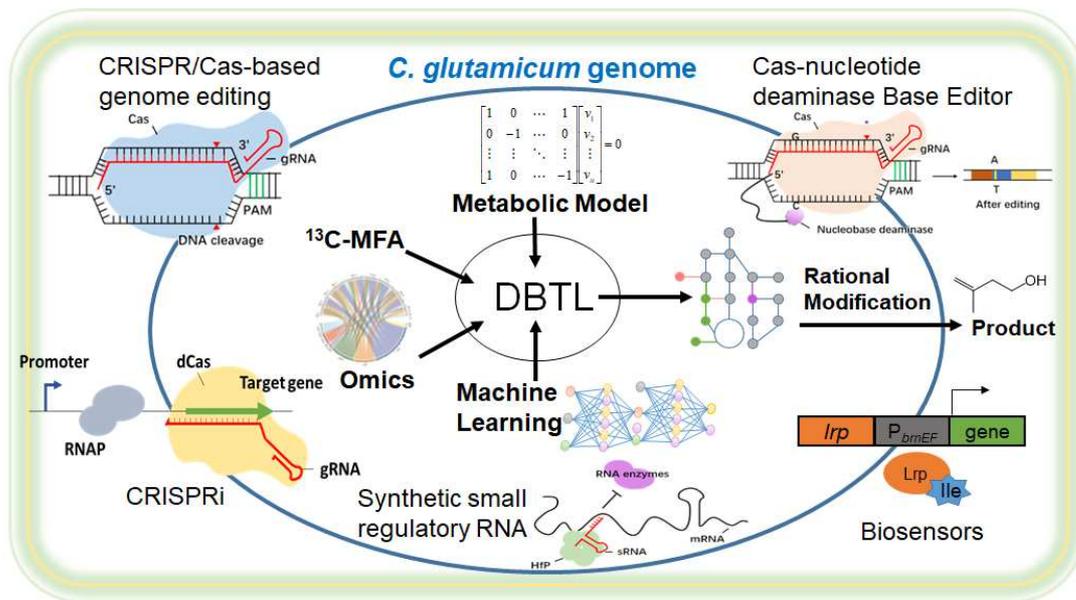


Figure 2

