BIOLOGY AT WORK

As the cosmetics industry seeks more sustainable and efficient ways to produce high-performance ingredients, fermentation is emerging as a next-generation manufacturing platform. By converting renewable feedstocks into valuable functional compounds, this biotechnology-driven approach offers a compelling alternative to conventional production methods.

The cosmetics industry is undergoing a significant transformation driven by consumer demand for sustainability, transparency, and environmentally responsible products. While much attention has been given to packaging and product claims, the environmental impact of cosmetic ingredients themselves is becoming increasingly important. Traditionally, cosmetic ingredients have been obtained through plant extraction, animal-derived sources and chemical synthesis. Although these approaches have enabled large-scale production, they can also present challenges related to resource consumption, supply chain stability, land use, and environmental footprint. Fermentation offers a fundamentally different approach. Instead of extracting molecules from nature, fermentation enables microorganisms to manufacture them directly. Through "precise" editing of metabolic pathways, it is possible to increase the yield, speed, and production of specific molecules [1]. The process generally involves microbial strain development, metabolic pathway optimization, controlled fermentation and downstream purification.

EFFICIENCY, CONSISTENCY AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

Fermentation-based manufacturing offers significant resource-efficiency advantages over conventional extraction. Operating in controlled bioreactor systems, it reduces dependence on agricultural land, water, and climate-sensitive crop production while enabling the use of renewable feedstocks. It can lower overall environmental impact through more efficient resource utilization. Knychala et al. [2] reported that precision fermentation may reduce water consumption and greenhouse gas emissions by 90 – 97 % compared with animal-based production methods. Fermentation is performed under tightly controlled manufacturing conditions, enabling consistent product quality and repro-

ducible batch-to-batch performance. Unlike plant-derived ingredients, fermentation is largely independent of seasonal fluctuations and climate-related risks, providing a more stable and predictable supply of raw materials. By reducing reliance on agricultural production, fermentation also enhances supply chain resilience and supports scalable, year-round manufacturing.

Fermentation aligns well with the principles of green chemistry by reducing environmental impact while improving process efficiency. Operating under relatively mild conditions, fermentation generally requires less energy than many conventional chemical manufacturing processes.

Furthermore, enzymes exhibit high substrate specificity, improving conversion efficiency while minimizing unwanted by-products and simplifying downstream purification. Combined with the use of renewable feedstocks, these advantages enable the production of high-value ingredients with a lower environmental footprint and consistent product quality.

CERAMIDES: A CASE STUDY IN FERMENTATION

Ceramides are naturally occurring lipids that play a critical role in maintaining skin barrier integrity and moisture retention. They account for approximately 50% of the lipids in the stratum corneum by mass. Their growing popularity in skincare reflects increasing scientific understanding of the relationship between ceramide deficiency and impaired skin barrier function.

The growing demand for skincare ceramides has increased interest in manufacturing approaches capable of delivering both high product quality and sustainable production. However, conventional ceramide production presents several technical challenges. Most commercially available ceramides are produced through multi-step chemical synthesis routes involving the preparation of sphingoid bases, fatty acid activation, amide bond formation, and multiple purification stages. Due to the structural complexity of ceramides, precise control of molecular composition and stereochemistry is often required to achieve the desired product specifications. [3,4] In addition, chemical synthesis frequently relies on organic solvents, multiple reaction steps, and energy-intensive purification processes. These factors can increase resource consumption and manufacturing complexity, particularly for high-purity ceramide grades used in premium skincare applications.

ENGINEERING MICROBIAL CELL FACTORIES

These challenges have stimulated growing interest in fermentation-based manufacturing, where microorganisms can be engineered to produce phytosphingosine and related ceramide precursors from renewable carbon sources. Advances in synthetic biology and metabolic engineering have enabled microorganisms to produce sphingolipid intermediates through pathways that mimic natural lipid biosynthesis. Using renewable carbon sources as feedstocks, fermentation provides an alternative route for manufacturing ceramide precursors under controlled conditions. Through strain engineering and fermentation process optimization, microbial cell factories can be developed to improve productivity and manufacturing efficiency, helping reduce production costs while enhancing sustainability. In case of modern engineered yeast strains have been designed to convert glucose into phytosphingosine, a key building block for ceramide production. Following downstream conversion and purification, phytosphingosine can be further transformed into various ceramide structures for cosmetic applications. Compared with conventional manufacturing routes, fermentation-based production offers several potential advantages, including the use of renewable feedstocks, reduced process complexity, consistent product quality, and an improved sustainability profile.

BEYOND CERAMIDES

Fermentation has evolved into a versatile manufacturing platform for cosmetic ingredients, with applications spanning vitamins, amino acids, peptides, ceramides, antioxidants, and functional lipids. Driven by advances in synthetic biology and increasing demand for sustainable production, the global fermentation market is expected to continue strong growth over the coming decade. The cosmetics industry is increasingly seeking manufacturing solutions that balance performance, quality, and sustainability. Fermentation represents a promising platform capable of addressing many limitations associated with conventional extraction and chemical synthesis. As demonstrated by ingredients such as ceramides, niacinamide, and squalane, advances in synthetic biology and metabolic engineering are enabling the efficient production of high-value cosmetic actives from renewable feedstocks. Beyond sustainability benefits, fermentation offers opportunities to improve product consistency, supply reliability, and manufacturing efficiency. As biotechnology continues to advance, fermentation is expected to play an increasingly important role in cosmetic ingredient manufacturing. Rather than asking what can be extracted from nature, the industry is increasingly exploring what can be manufactured through biology.

References:

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Eduard Albrecht
Managing Director, PolyNeo GmbH,
Frankfurt/ Main, Germany, www.polyneo.eu