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High-titer *de novo* production of lathyrane diterpenoids by engineered *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*

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***Euphorbiaceae* are an important source of medically important diterpenoids, such as the anticancer drug ingenol-3-angelate and the antiretroviral drug prostratin. However, extraction from the genetically intractable natural producers is often limited by the small quantities produced, while the organic synthesis of terpene-derived drugs is challenging and similarly low-yielding. While transplanting the biosynthetic pathway into a heterologous host has proven successful for some drugs, it has been largely unsuccessful for diterpenoids due to their elaborate biosynthetic pathways and lack of genetic resources and tools for gene discovery. Using integrations, we engineered casbene precursor production in *S. cerevisiae*, verified the ability of 6 *Euphorbia lathyris* and *Jatropha curcas* cytochrome P450s to oxidize casbene, and optimized the expression of these P450s and an alcohol dehydrogenase to generate jolkinol C, achieving ~800mg/L of jolkinol C and over 1g/L total oxidized casbanes, the highest titer of oxidized diterpenes in yeast reported to date. This strain enables the semisynthesis of biologically active jolkinol C derivatives and will be an important tool in the elucidation of the biosynthetic pathways towards ingenanes, tiglianes, and lathyranes. These findings demonstrate the ability of *S. cerevisiae* to produce oxidized drug precursors in quantities that are sufficient for drug development and pathway discovery.**

A range of medicinal diterpenoid compounds (*e.g.*, casbanes, lathyranes, jatrophanes, tiglianes, and ingenanes) produced solely in *Euphorbiaceae* and *Thymelaceae* plants have gained interest due to their unique anti-cancer, anti-HIV, vascular-relaxing, neuro-protective, anti-inflammatory, and immunomodulatory activities ([Vasas and Hohmann 2014](#); [Srivalli and Lakshmi 2012](#); [Jiao et al. 2009](#); [Halaweish et al. 2002](#); [Wang et al. 2015](#)). These compounds include ingenol-3-angelate, recently approved by the US FDA for the treatment of the premalignant skin condition actinic keratosis ([Siller et al. 2009](#)) (**Fig. 1b**); prostratin, in phase I clinical trials as an adjuvant therapy to clear latent viral reservoirs; and resiniferatoxin, studied for its powerful analgesic effects ([Johnson et al. 2008](#); [Payne et al. 2005](#)). Indeed, the demand for medicinal diterpenoids is exemplified by the rise of paclitaxel and other *Taxus*-derived drugs, which is estimated to be a \$2.3 billion industry worldwide ([Bishop and Pagiola 2012](#)).

The medicinal properties and unusual structures of lathyrane diterpenoids, a group of tricyclic diterpenes derived from the hydrocarbon casbene, as well as tigliane and ingenane diterpenes have led to many attempts at chemical synthesis and direct purification from plants ([Shimokawa et al. 2007](#); [Wender and McDonald 1990](#); [Tanino et al. 2003](#); [Vasas and Hohmann 2014](#)). Prostratin is produced via a semisynthetic route, and ingenol-3-angelate by mass extraction from *Euphorbia peplus* plants. However, chemical synthesis is complicated by the multiple chiral centers in these diterpenoid compounds, while extraction from plant tissues is inefficient and costly, with yields typically in the range of 0.1% to 10% from starting material ([Tanino et al. 2003](#); [Wender et al. 2008](#)). The development of a microbial production host for lathyrane diterpenoids could significantly reduce the production cost and increase the availability of these compounds. Such a host could also produce other medically important diterpenoids that are not produced naturally or at levels insufficient to detect.

Yeast is a particularly attractive host for microbial engineering because of its robustness in industrial fermentation and genetic tractability. The development of yeast strains producing >10 g/L of the anti-malarial artemisinic acid has demonstrated the potential of using yeast as a heterologous host for oxidized natural product production ([Paddon et al., 2013](#))([Westfall et al., 2012](#)). Development of monoterpene (C5) and diterpenoid (C20) production in yeast has lagged behind sesquiterpene (C15) production, with fewer studies and lower titers (<20mg/L and <1 g/L respectively) ([Triikka et al. 2015](#); [Ignea et al. 2014](#); [Jongedijk et al. 2015](#); [Amiri et al. 2016](#); [Ignea et al. 2011](#); [Andersen-Ranberg et al. 2016](#)).

The biosynthesis of lathyrane isoprenoids begins with the common 5-carbon isoprenoid precursors IPP and DMAPP which are sequentially condensed to form the universal 20-carbon isoprenoid intermediate geranylgeranyl-pyrophosphate (GGPP). A diterpene synthase found in several *Euphorbiaceae*, casbene synthase (CBS), cyclizes GGPP to form casbene (**Fig. 1a**) ([Kirby et al. 2010](#)). From casbene, the biosynthetic route to lathyrane isoprenoids is poorly understood, but is thought to proceed through intermediates such as jolkinol C *via* cytochrome P450-catalyzed oxidations and possibly a short-chain alcohol dehydrogenase (ADH). Different groups have debated the involvement of the ADH in the formation of jolkinol C; Luo and colleagues found that, in addition to the CYPs required to oxidize casbene, an *Euphorbia lathyris* short-chain ADH (ElADH1) was necessary for jolkinol C formation in *N. benthamiana* and *in vitro* ([Luo et al. 2016](#)). In contrast, King and colleagues never mentioned the use of an ADH for the production of jolkinol C, but saw production of jolkinol C from coexpression of casbene synthase and two *Jatropha curcas* CYPs ([King et al. 2016](#)).

Reconstituting complex oxidized terpenoid biosynthetic pathways, such as those of lathyranes, in heterologous hosts has posed numerous problems requiring optimizing the heterologous cytochrome P450 reductase expression with the expression of the CYP, as well as balancing the redox environment within the cell ([Paddon et al. 2013](#); [Renault et al. 2014](#)). Indeed, only about 40% of all plant-derived CYPs tested in yeast express poorly if at all ([Renault et al. 2014](#)). It is important to note that yeast has proved to be a better host for CYP expression than prokaryotic hosts such as *Escherichia coli* due to the presence of the endoplasmic reticulum

in the former organism. A previous study found that despite the coexpression of the pathway enzymes required to produce jolkinol C in *Nicotiana benthamiana* and *in vitro*, coexpression of these enzymes in yeast did not result in jolkinol C formation (Luo et al. 2016). This research illustrates the need to engineer casbene and lathyrene pathways in yeast to aid functional testing of additional pathway enzymes.

The present work describes the establishment of yeast strains producing lathyrene diterpenoids as a platform for producing varied medicinal compounds. We have produced a strain producing the lathyrene backbone casbene at high titer. We verified the ability of *E. lathyris* and *J. curcas* P450s to oxidize casbene, and resolved some discrepancies between the two pathways previously proposed (Luo et al. 2016; King et al. 2016). Finally, we optimized the expression of these P450s and an short chain ADH to generate jolkinol C at high titers producing a strain with all pathway genes stably integrated as a chassis for additional gene discovery.

Results

Engineering casbene production in yeast.

Past studies have reported casbene production in *S. cerevisiae* by expressing the casbene synthase gene (*CBS*) from plasmids (Kirby et al. 2010; Luo et al. 2016). To date, titers remain under 30 mg/L, hampering development of advanced lathyrene diterpenoid production strains. Previous studies expressing plant-derived diterpene synthases in yeast suggest protein insolubility as a limiting factor in heterologous expression and demonstrated improved activity by tagging with soluble proteins (Reider Apel et al. 2017; Ignea et al. 2015). To develop a strain for high-level production of casbene, we optimized soluble expression of Cbsp using protein tagging strategies. We integrated a truncated version of the gene encoding *Jatropha curcas* Cbsp (*JcCBS1*) alone or with various protein tags into a GGPP-producing strain developed by our group, GTy116 (Reider Apel et al. 2017), expressed from the galactose-inducible promoter from *GALI*. These tags included a maltose binding protein (MBP, codon-optimized for yeast expression) attached to the N-terminus of Jcbs1p, which led to 15-fold improvement in casbene titers over the untagged Jcbs1p variant (Fig. 2a). Two other constructs, green fluorescent protein (GFP) attached to the C-terminus of Jcbs1p, and a yeast codon-optimized *JcCBS1*, both showed mild effects on casbene titer. Ignea and colleagues reported an over 200-fold increase in diterpene production when they expressed a mutated GGPP-producing *S. cerevisiae* *ERG20* variant, *ERG20(F96C)* in a diterpene strain, and fusion of this protein to the diterpene synthase in their system appeared to improve the titer further, likely due to increased solubility of the terpene synthase (Ignea et al. 2015). We screened the fusion protein JcCBS1-ERG20(F96C)p and saw modest titer improvements. However, a two-tag variant of Jcbs1p with an MBP tag on the N-terminus and an Erg20(F96C)p fusion on the C-terminus outperformed all other Jcbs1p variants, resulting in ~80 mg/L casbene. To examine protein solubility improvement from protein tagging strategies, we developed a 3-tag construct, MBP-JcCbs1-Erg20(F96C)-GFPp, for imaging. This strain showed significantly elevated and disbursed GFP expression within the cell relative to the JcCbs1-GFPp construct, indicating that the MBP tag and Erg20(F96C)p fusion

indeed aided expression, possibly due to increased protein stability (**Fig. 2b**). A strain with three additional JcCbs1p cassettes (hereafter referred to as JWY509) led to a final titer of ~160 mg/L casbene, by far the highest titer of casbene in yeast reported to date.

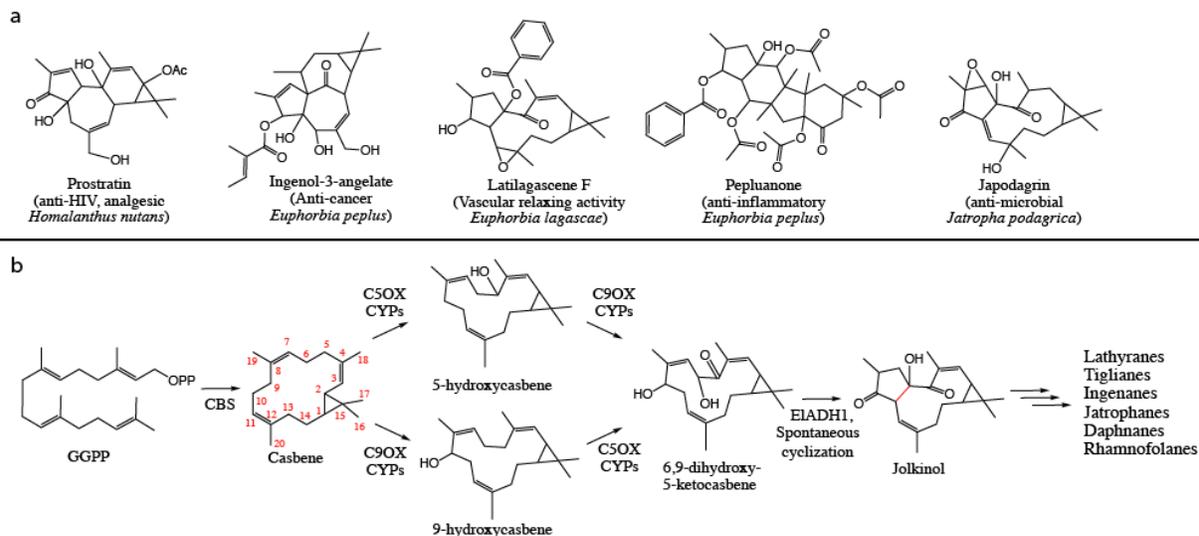


Figure 1 | *Euphorbiaceae* diterpenoid biosynthetic pathways originate from casbene. (a) Structures of bioactive *Euphorbiaceae* diterpenes. **(b)** Proposed pathway for the production of medicinal *Euphorbiaceae* diterpenoids begins with geranylgeranyl diphosphate (GGPP) from the DXP pathway in plants, which is cyclized by casbene synthase (CBS) and subsequently oxidized by numerous P450s. Enzymes required to form jolkinol C in both *J. curcas* and *E. lathyris* have been functionally characterized. C9OX CYP (EiCYP71D445p/JcCYP71D495p) homologs oxidize the C-9 position of casbene, while C5OX CYP (EiCYP726A27p/JcCYP726A35p/JcCYP726A20p) homologs oxidize the C-5 position of casbene. Consequently, both enzymes have been shown to catalyze the hydroxylation of C-6 position of casbene, the formation of a carbonyl at which position has been postulated to result in the tautomerization and spontaneous ring closure forming jolkinol C. Hamberger and colleagues have shown the necessity of the alcohol dehydrogenase ELADH1p to form jolkinol C *in vitro* using *E. lathyris* enzymes. Additional steps towards production of decorated diterpenes are diverse and unknown.

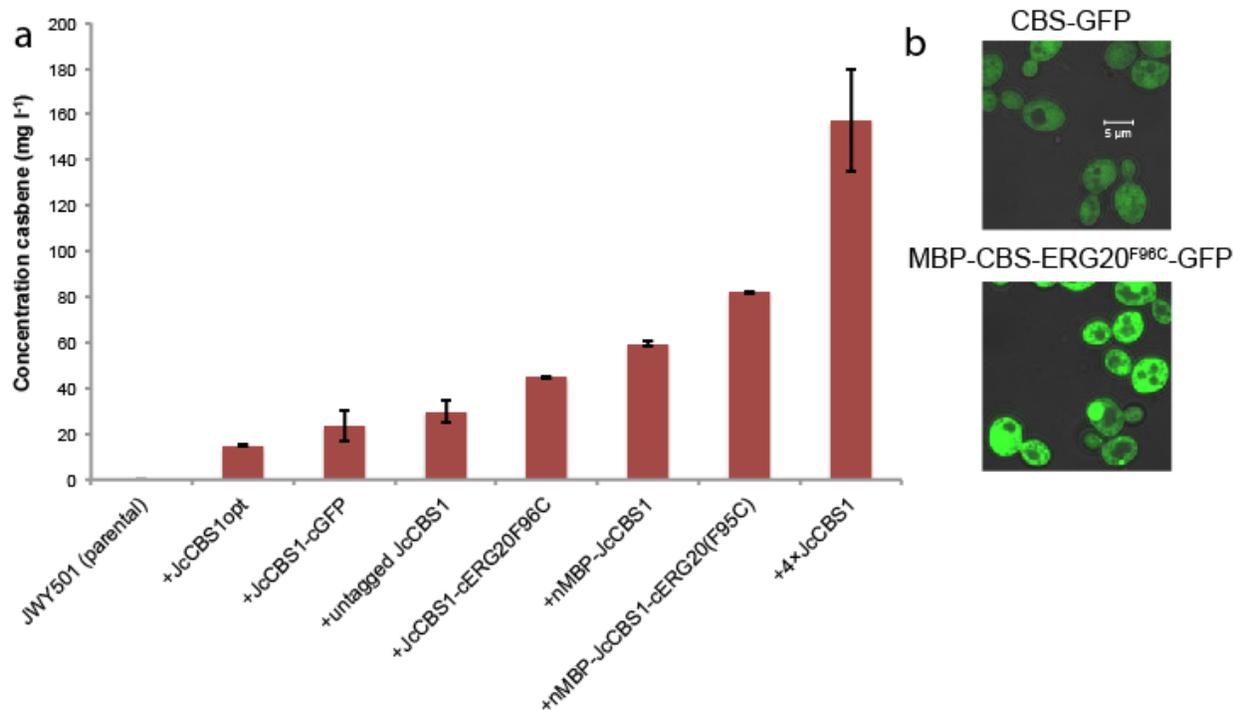


Figure 2 | Engineering casbene production in yeast. (a) Different protein solubility tags on *J. curcas* casbene synthase (JcCbs1p) improved casbene titer, with the preceding letter representing the fusion of the tag on the N- or C- terminus of Cbsp. All *JcCBS1* variants were integrated into the GGPP-producing parent strain, JWY501. Strain JWY509, containing four copies of *JcCBS1*, was used as the parent for all P450 testing in subsequent studies. Data represent the averages of three replicate cultures; error bars show s.d. (b) GFP-tagging experiments with JcCbs1p reveal increased expression and protein stability with solubility tags. Confocal microscopy studies show low expression from a single integrated copy of GFP fused JcCbs1p in yeast (top). A single integrated copy of three tag *JcCBS1* (producing nMBP-JcCbs1-cErg20[F96C]-cGFPp) results in increased expression levels (bottom).

Engineering CYP expression in yeast.

Besides the synthesis of the diterpene casbene, lathyrane biosynthesis involves CYP-catalyzed oxidation at three positions of the casbene hydrocarbon skeleton, as well as the formation of a C-C bond between carbons 6 and 10 (see numbering scheme in **Fig. 1b**). We examined CYPs known and hypothesized to act on casbene in our high-titer casbene-producing yeast strain JWY509. CYPs from *J. curcas* and *E. lathyris* reported to act on C-9 of casbene (hereafter referred to as C9OX CYPs) and ones that act on C-5 and C-6 (hereafter referred to as C5OX CYPs) were co-integrated with a cytochrome P450 reductase (CPR)--required for channelling electrons from NADPH to the CYP heme domain--found in the transcriptome of *J. curcas*, hereafter referred to as JcCPR1p. We used JcCPR1p for both the *E. lathyris* and *J. curcas* CYPs because it has been shown that plant P450-CPR interacting domains are highly conserved across plants species, and previous studies have had success using non-cognate CPRs within *Euphorbiaceae* for functional testing of casbene C9OX and C5OX CYPs (Luo et al. 2016; Jensen and Møller 2010).

Cultures expressing JcCBS1p, C9OX CYPs, and JcCPR1p produced 9-hydroxycasbene, 9-ketocasbene, or a mixture of both, as identified by GC-EIMS fragmentation patterns (**Fig. 3a**, **Supplemental Fig. 10**). Additionally, we decided to test the CYP adjacent to the C9OX2 in the published *J. curcas* jolkinol C biosynthetic gene cluster (**Supplementary Fig. 1**) ([King et al. 2016](#)). This enzyme, JcC9OX1, whose activity was not previously reported, showed low-level activity on casbene at the C-9 position when expressed in our casbene-producing yeast strain. Of the C9OX CYPs tested, the most productive enzyme was the codon-optimized *E. lathyris* EIC9OX1, which consumed 90% of the casbene relative to the parental strain, while producing more than 44 mg/L of C-9 oxidized casbanes. The most productive enzyme from *J. curcas* was JcC9OX2 (in JWY511), which consumed 70% of the casbene relative to the parental strain, while producing 35 mg/L C-9 oxidized casbene. Interestingly, EIC9OX1 produced primarily 9-hydroxycasbene, while the other C9OX candidates produce a relatively equal mix of the 9-ketocasbene and 9-hydroxycasbene intermediates (**Supplementary Fig. 3**). Due to EIC9OX1 showing both the highest total C-9 oxidation activity, as well as product specificity for 9-hydroxycasbene--our desired intermediate--we chose this strain for further pathway engineering.

Table 1 Yeast strains and gene nomenclature		Compound	References
Strain	Parent (+ additional genetic changes)		
GTY116	<i>MATa leu2-3,112::His3MX6_P_{GAL1}-ERG19/P_{GAL10}-ERG8 ura3-52::URA3_P_{GAL1}-mvaS(A110G)/P_{GAL10}-mvaE(CO) his3Δ1::hphMX4_P_{GAL1}-ERG12/P_{GAL10}-IDI1 trp1-289::TRP1_P_{GAL1}-crtE(X.den)/P_{GAL10}-ERG20 yprc815::natMX_P_{GAL1}-crtE(opt)/P_{GAL10}-crtE</i>	GGPP	ref. 1
JWY501	GTY116 (<i>ura3-52</i> prototrophy removed for use of Cas9 system)	GGPP	This work
JWY509	JWY3 (<i>ARS1622b::P_{GAL1}-CBS ARS1014a::P_{GAL1}-nMBP-CBS, P_{GAL10}-nGFP-CBS ARS308a::P_{GAL1}-nMBP-CBS-erg20F96c</i>)	Casbene	This work
JWY510	JWY509 (<i>ARS911b::P_{GAL10}-JcCPR1, P_{GAL1}-JcC9OX1</i>)	C-9 oxidized casbanes	This work
JWY511	JWY509 (<i>ARS911b::P_{GAL10}-JcCPR1, P_{GAL1}-JcC9OX2</i>)	C-9 oxidized casbanes	This work
JWY512	JWY509 (<i>ARS911b::P_{GAL10}-JcCPR1, P_{GAL1}-EIC9OX1</i>)	C-9 oxidized casbanes	This work
JWY513	JWY509 (<i>ARS911b::P_{GAL10}-JcCPR1, P_{GAL1}-EIC5OX1</i>)	C-5 oxidized casbanes	This work
JWY514	JWY509 (<i>ARS911b::P_{GAL10}-JcCPR1, P_{GAL1}-JcC5OX1</i>)	C-5 oxidized casbanes	This work
JWY515	JWY509 (<i>ARS911b::P_{GAL10}-JcCPR1, P_{GAL1}-JcC5OX2</i>)	C-5 oxidized casbanes	This work
JWY516	JWY512 (<i>ARS1021b::P_{GAL1}-JcC5OX2</i>)	Jolkinol	This work
JWY517	JWY512 (<i>ARS1021b::P_{GAL1}-JcC5OX1</i>)	Mix of C-5/C-9 oxidized casbanes	This work
JWY518	JWY512 (<i>ARS1021b::P_{GAL1}-EIC5OX1</i>)	Mix of C-5/C-9 oxidized casbanes	This work
JWY519	JWY511 (<i>ARS1021b::P_{GAL1}-JcC5OX2</i>)	Jolkinol	This work
JWY520	JWY516 (<i>HIS3b::P_{GAL1}-JcADH1</i>)	Jolkinol	This work
JWY521	JWY519 (<i>HIS3B::P_{GAL1}-JcADH1</i>)	Jolkinol	This work
Abbreviation	Published name		References
JcCBS1	JcCSH		ref. 11
JcC9OX1	JcCYP71D496		ref. 12
JcC9OX2	JcCYP71D495		ref. 12
EIC9OX1	EICYP71D445		ref. 13
EIC5OX1	EICYP726A20		ref. 13
JcC5OX1	JcCYP35a20		ref. 12
JcC5OX2	JcCYP726A20		ref. 12

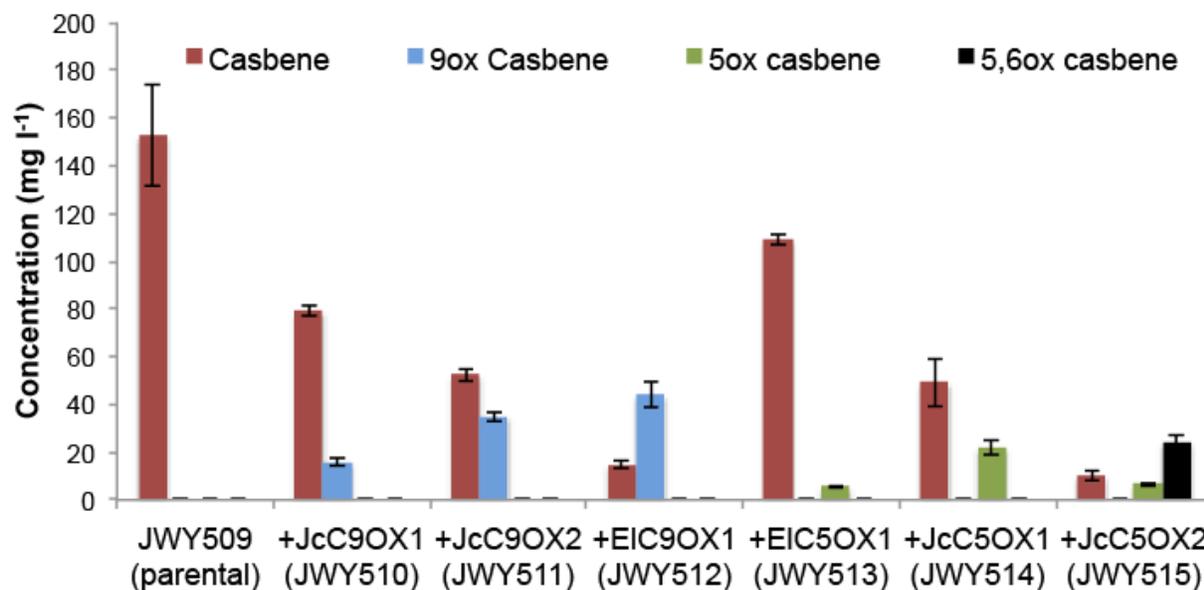


FIGURE 3| Titers of casbene, singly- and doubly- oxidized casbanes (sum of hydroxy and oxo forms), detected in the presence of different C9OX and C5OX CYP variants. All CYP variant constructs were individually co-integrated with the *J. curcas CPR* (*JcCPR1*) into the 911b locus of the high titer casbene strain JWY509. The formation of 9-ketocasbene has been shown to be a dead-end product and is likely due to overactivity of C9OX on an accumulating 9-hydroxycasbene, resulting in double oxidation at the C-9 position. Thus, we determined the overall activity of the CYPs by the total production of these products, as we presume that the 9-hydroxycasbene product of these enzymes will be consumed in the presence of a C5OX CYP, which has been shown to act on both casbene and 9-hydroxycasbene, but not 9-ketocasbene *in vitro* (Luo et al. 2016). Cultures were extracted after 48 hours and analyzed for oxidized casbane production by GC-MS. EIC9OX1 outperforms all C9OX CYPs in C-9-oxidized casbene production, while JcC5OX2 outperforms all the other C5OX CYPs in production of C-5/C-6 oxidized casbene. Data represent the averages of three replicate cultures; error bars show s.d.

One of the C5OX CYPs, JcC5OX1p, has been shown to localize to the plastidial membrane rather than the endoplasmic reticulum when heterologously expressed in *N. benthamiana* (King et al. 2016). To test the expression of this CYP in yeast, we designed a chimeric version of the enzyme by replacing the predicted N-terminal plastidial transit sequence with the beginning of the ER-localizing EIC5OX1p sequence. The resulting chimeric protein was a similar length to the non-plastid localizing C5OX CYPs (EMANUELSSON et al. 1999) (Supplementary Fig. 8).

Upon expressing C5OX CYPs in JWY509, we noticed the production of 5-ketocasbene as well as 6-hydroxy-5-ketocasbene from only JcC5OX2p, which is consistent with a previous report using the *N. benthamiana* expression system (King et al. 2016) (Fig. 3b). Both other C5OX CYPs produced only 5-ketocasbene at lower titers.

Combining C9OX and C5OX CYPs to produce jolkinol C.

After we found the most productive C9OX and C5OX CYPs, we decided to test our C5OX CYPs in the best C9OX CYP strain, JWY512, for production of the desired product jolkinol C. It was unclear what the products of co-expressing C5OX CYPs in strain JWY512 would be, given that previous studies disagree on this matter (Luo et al. 2016; King et al. 2016). Despite

detecting jolkinol C in *N. benthamiana* when expressing *E. lathyris* C9OX CYP and C5OX CYP, coexpressing these enzymes in yeast did not result in the production of jolkinol C, but rather the formation of primarily 5-hydroxy-9-ketocasbene, a purported dead-end product (Luo et al. 2016). This result may be attributed to differences in pH or some intracellular environmental condition responsible for the ring closure in plant cells that is different in yeast cells. We therefore tested C9OX CYP and C5OX CYP combinations in yeast and analyzed product profiles by GC-MS, HPLC, and NMR (Supplementary Fig. 4, 5, and 6). HPLC-UV analysis was possible since casbanes and lathyranes with α,β -unsaturated carbonyls absorb in the 270-290 nm range (Seip and Hecker 1983). Indeed, when these samples were run on HPLC, we saw the appearance of 3 major peaks, which NMR analysis showed were 6-hydroxy-5-ketocasbene, 6,9-dihydroxy-5-ketocasbene (proposed to be the final intermediate before jolkinol C in the *J. curcas* pathway) and (in one strain) jolkinol C (Supplementary Fig. 5). The only C5OX CYP that produced detectable jolkinol C when expressed in JWY512 was JcC5OX2p, producing ~360 mg/L jolkinol C. (Fig. 4). The chimeric JcC5OX1p did not produce any detectable jolkinol C.

We cointegrated the best C9OX CYP and C5OX CYP from *J. curcas*, surmising that P450s from the same species may cooperate to produce higher levels of jolkinol C. This strain, JWY519, produced a slightly higher level of jolkinol C (400 mg/L) than the cross-species pair (JWY518). Thus, we used this strain for further strain development (Fig. 4).

ADH's role in jolkinol C production and strain engineering to improve jolkinol C titer.

Previous studies on lathyrene diterpenoid biosynthesis have suggested the involvement of *Euphorbiaceae* short-chain ADHs in the formation of jolkinol C. One study found an *E. lathyris* short-chain ADH (ElADH1p) was required for jolkinol C production *in vitro* and *in planta* (Luo et al. 2016). Another group working on the the *J. curcas* pathway reported jolkinol C production in the absence of an ADH, despite a homolog of ElADH1p being present in a *J. curcas* gene cluster (NW_012124159) containing jolkinol C biosynthetic genes including *JcCBS1*, *C9OX*, and *C5OX* (King et al. 2016). We thus sought to determine the role of short-chain ADHs in the formation of jolkinol C in yeast.

We proceeded to test native and codon-optimized forms of *ElADH1* and *JcADH1* in our top jolkinol C producers JWY518 and JWY519. We found that all integrated ADHs drastically improved jolkinol C titer by about 2-fold in our jolkinol C strain (Fig. 3), and increased the levels of the non-ring closed accumulated intermediate, 6,9-dihydroxy-5-ketocasbene. Neither codon optimization nor protein-tagging of the ADHs improved titer. The production efficiencies of the ADHs from the two species did not differ statistically (Supplementary Figs. 6).

While testing different cultivation conditions for jolkinol C production, we noticed a consistent increase in titers of jolkinol C and oxidized casbane intermediates when using smaller culture volumes and faster culture agitation, with highest production in 2 mL cultures in milliliter plates and lowest production in flasks, likely due to increased oxygen supply improving CYP activity (Supplemental Figure 6). This indicates a need for additional strain and process engineering for industrial applications. Our final top producing strain, JWY521, produces 801 mg/L +/- 42mg of jolkinol C. This high titer illustrates the promise of using engineered yeast for

further gene discovery of related pathways, circumventing the problem of low yield often associated with gene functional testing using other techniques.

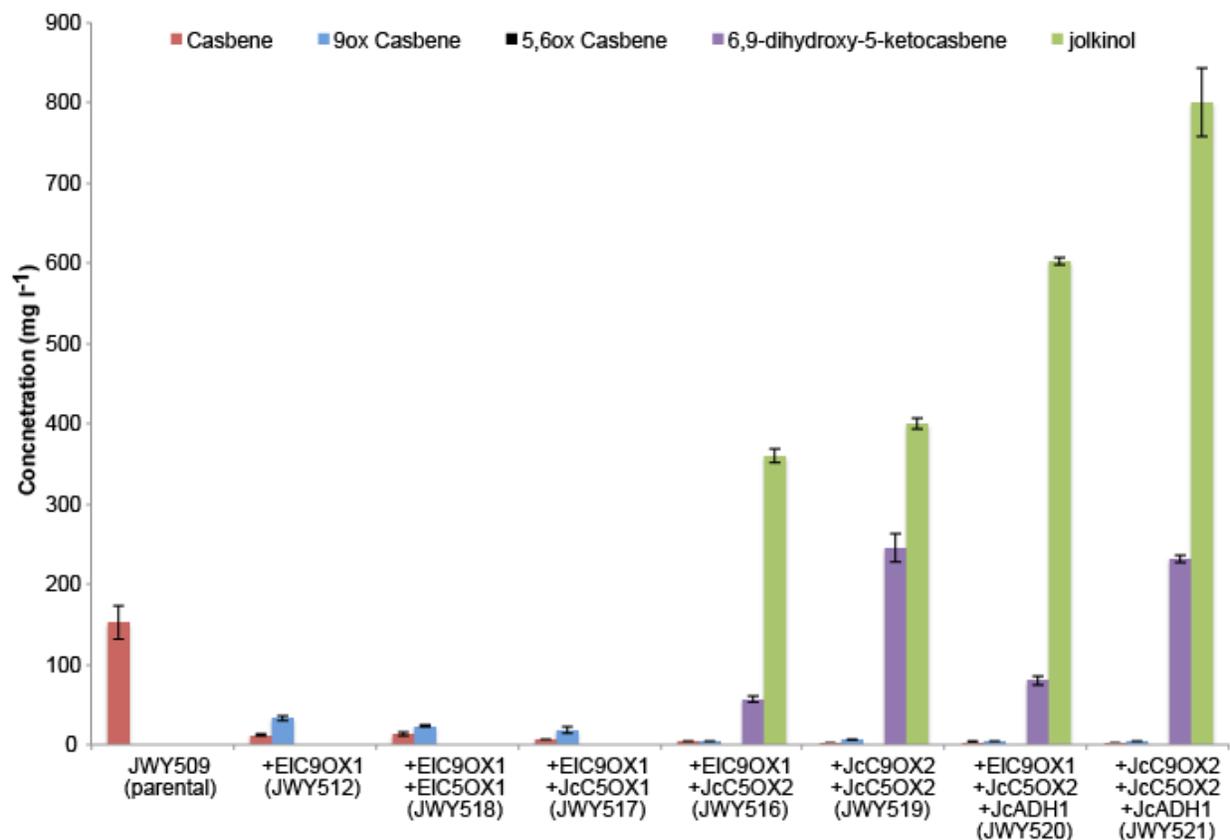


Figure 4 | Production of 6,9-hydroxy-5-ketocasbene and jolkinol C with different C9OX CYP/C5OX CYP combinations and short chain ADH variants. C5OX CYPs were screened for jolkinol C production when expressed with the most productive C9OX CYP, EIC9OX1p. Only JcC5OX2p formed any detectable level of jolkinol C. Additionally, we integrated this CYP into the best *J. curcas* C9OX CYP parental strain containing JcC9OX2p. It is important to note that EIC5OX1p produced low titers of C-5 oxidized casbanes in JWY509 and produced low levels of 9-keto-5-hydroxycasbene, a purported dead end product, while producing no triply oxidized casbanes nor jolkinol C. All strains were cultured in 2ml of YPG media in milliliter plates, grown for 48 h, and the culture medium analyzed for casbene (red bars) and C-9 oxidized casbene (blue bars) by GC-MS, while all other compounds were measured by HPLC-UV. Bars represent mean values \pm 1 s.d. of three replicate cultures. All compounds were quantified using authentic standards purified from high-producing strains.

Discussion

Diterpenoid drugs have a long history of success in medicine. Although discovery of biosynthetic pathways can be arduous, we believe that applying the techniques used in this work in yeast can provide a stable biosynthetic platform for accelerated gene discovery for valuable FDA-approved compounds such as ingenane-3-angelate and taxol. These natural products are often difficult to source in quantities necessary for drug clinical trials due to their large number of chiral centers disallowing efficient chemical synthesis and low yields from plant cell culture or traditional farming. We believe that protein tagging strategies, balancing copy number, and screening libraries of enzymes from different species that perform the same reaction can allow

one to find the optimal combinations of terpenoid biosynthetic genes for industrial drug production in yeast strains, particularly for oxygenated compounds.

Our data conclusively show that EIC9OX1p and JcC5OX2p coexpressed alongside an short chain ADH allow for the biosynthesis of the important lathyrane precursor jolkinol C. This pathway illustrates the potential of combinatorial P450 screening and the use of yeast to characterize P450 expression in terpenoid biosynthetic pathways. The final engineered jolkinol C strain produced 800 mg/L jolkinol C. These titers highlight the advantage of yeast as a host over the previously used transient expression in *N. benthamiana* for gene discovery. The extraction of jolkinol C from this yeast chassis greatly simplifies gene discovery of the pathway, while using *N. benthamiana* as an expression host requires harvesting and extracting many plants and performing many downstream isolation steps to produce enough jolkinol C for gene discovery. Additionally, the methods used in the paper are advantageous over previous terpenoid gene discovery methods in yeast, as previous groups have relied on high-copy number plasmids, which suffer from plasmid instability, high levels of expression variability, and the limited number of genes that can be expressed from such a system.

Because previous studies have suggested yeast codon-optimization of CYPs improved titer of target compounds, we used all codon-optimized CYPs. However, we decided to see if this trend was consistent in the downstream pathway enzymes, the ADHs. Interestingly, the codon-optimized short chain ADH strains did not outperform their non codon-optimized counterparts. However, we believe that codon optimization can be used as a general strategy for improving enzyme expression in diterpenoid pathways.

The necessity of a short chain ADH for the formation of jolkinol C has been debated. However, our work shows that although the short chain ADHs tested greatly improve jolkinol C production, they are not necessary for production of jolkinol C. These findings resolve the differences seen in King and Luo's experiments. King and colleagues produced jolkinol C by transient expression of CBS, C9OX CYP and C5OX CYP in *N. benthamiana* and did not require the use of an short chain ADH, while Luo and colleagues only saw the formation of jolkinol C in the presence of E1ADH1 *in vitro* and *in planta*.

The lack of jolkinol C production in the *E. lathyrus* system in the absence of a short chain ADH is likely due to the low activity of EIC5OX1p on the C-6 position of the casbene skeleton, even when coexpressed with a C9OX CYP. To this effect, our strain JWY518 produced a doubly oxidized casbane, shown to be 9-keto-5-hydroxycasbene by Luo and colleagues, which is a dead-end product (**Supplementary Fig. 3**).

Based on *in vitro* data reported by Luo and colleagues, we believe that the ADH converts 6,9-dihydroxy-5-ketocasbene to 6-hydroxy-5,9-diketocasbene, which is poised for spontaneous cyclization into jolkinol C. Perhaps, the *J. curcas* CYPs have some ability to effect a second oxidation on the C-9 position of the intermediate 6,9-dihydroxy-5-ketocasbene and thus produce detectable levels of jolkinol C in the absence of an short chain ADH. The dramatic jolkinol C titer improvements in the ADH strains supports the direct involvement of an ADH in jolkinol C biosynthesis.

While the short chain ADH integrations caused a massive increase in jolkinol C titers, it also nearly doubled titers of the precursor 6,9-dihydroxy-5-ketocasbene. We cannot explain the massive total diterpenoid titer increase in the jolkinol C producing strains relative to the casbene and singly/doubly oxidized casbane producing strains. Redox balance could be the cause of this, since the reaction catalyzed by the short-chain ADH consumes NAD and generates NADH, improving the redox balance within the yeast cell ([Rigoulet et al. 2004](#)). It is also likely that the triply oxidized casbanes and lathyranes are less cytotoxic than casbene and singly or doubly hydroxylated casbene.

Our work represents significant advances in the field of diterpenoid biosynthesis in yeast, identifying biosynthetic steps required for heterologous production of the important diterpenoid intermediate jolkinol C. Additional gene discovery in *Euphorbiaceae* diterpene pathways is currently being conducted in our lab with this jolkinol C chassis strain, particularly for the discovery of additional genes in the biosynthetic pathways of ingenol-3-angelate and tiglianes such as prostratin. This work represents the highest levels of oxidized diterpenoids produced to date in any microorganism.

Methods

Strain construction

The parent *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* strain used for all engineering was GTy116 {MATa, leu2-3, 112::HIS3MX6-GAL1p-ERG19/GAL10p-ERG8;ura3-52::URA3-GAL1p-MvaSA110G/GAL10p-MvaE (codon optimized); his3 Δ 1::hphMX4-GAL1p-ERG12/GAL10p-IDI1; trp1-289::TRP1_GAL1p-CrtE(X.den)/GAL10p-ERG20;YPRCdelta15::NatMX-GAL1p-CrtE(opt)/GAL10p-CrtE} previously used by our lab ([Reider Apel et al. 2017](#)). The integration cassettes for all subsequent strains (**Table 1, Supplementary Table 1**) were created using the software tools CASdesigner (casdesigner.jbei.org) and DIVA (diva.jbei.org) and integrated using the previously reported, cloning-free methodology via Cas9-aided homologous recombination ([Reider Apel et al. 2017](#)). Integration cassettes containing 1-kb flanking homology regions targeting a chosen genomic locus were constructed by PCR amplifying donor DNA fragments using primers generated by CASdesigner, then co-transformed with a Cas9-gRNA plasmid (pCut) targeting the chosen genomic locus. CASdesigner primers provide 30–60 nt of inter-fragment homology allowing 1–5 separate fragments to assemble via homologous recombination *in vivo*. pCuts targeting empty genomic loci (e.g., 208a, 1622b) were available pre-cloned, and pCuts targeting new sites (e.g., for deletions) were assembled *in vivo* from a linear backbone and a linear PCR fragment containing the new gRNA sequence, as described previously ([Reider Apel et al. 2017](#)). The new gRNA sequence for the URA3 locus (Suppl. Table 1) was chosen using DNA2.0 (www.dna20.com/eCommerce/cas9/input). To generate donor DNA fragments, native sequences—e.g., chromosomal homology regions, promoters—were amplified from CEN.PK2-1C genomic DNA, while heterologous sequences—e.g., P450 coding sequences (**Supplementary Fig. 8**)—were amplified from synthetic gene blocks codon-optimized (for

expression in *S. cerevisiae*) and synthesized by Integrated DNA Technologies (www.idtdna.com).

All PCRs used Phusion Hot Start II DNA polymerase (www.thermofisher.com, cat. F549L). The following touchdown PCR cycling conditions were used for all PCRs: 1 cycle of 98°C for 15 sec; 25 cycles of 98°C for 10 sec, 65°C for 30 sec (dropping 1 degree each cycle after the first cycle), 72°C for 30 sec, and then 25 cycles of 98°C for 10 sec, 50°C for 30 sec, 72°C for 30 sec. Transformations were performed via heat-shock using ~ 200 ng pCut, ~ 1 µg donor DNA per sample, and 20 min heat shock at 42°C, then plated all cells on selective agarose plates ([Gietz and Woods 2002](#)). For assembling a pCut targeting a new site by homologous recombination, we used 200 ng linear pCut backbone and 500 ng of a 1- kb fragment containing the gRNA sequence, as described ([Reider Apel et al. 2017](#)). For multi-site integrations, we used 200 ng total linear pCut backbone, and the same amounts of gRNA fragment and donor DNA for each site as we would have for a single integration. Colonies were screened by PCR directed at the target locus, and for integrations, one representative colony sequenced. Three to four biological replicates were analyzed for each strain.

Development of chimeric JcCYP726A35.

To produce a JcCYP726A35 chimera for expression in yeast, the length of the plastidial transit sequence was estimated using ChloroP prediction, at about 132 residues. The ER localizing tag of an ER localized C5ox CYP, EICYP726A27, was annotated by ChloroP and the front 36 residues were used to replace the ChloroP predicted native plastidial transit sequence of JcCYP726A35 ([EMANUELSSON et al. 1999](#)). The resulting chimeric protein was ordered from IDT.

Synthetic genes and oligonucleotides.

Oligonucleotides and synthetic genes were commercially synthesized (Integrated DNA Technologies, Inc.). All codon optimized sequences were designed based on the IDT online tool. Sequences of synthetic genes and oligonucleotides can be found in [Supplementary Tables 4 and 5](#), respectively.

Culture and fermentation conditions

Selective agar plates used for transformations were purchased from Teknova (www.teknova.com, cat. C3080). Liquid selective medium used to grow transformants contained 0.2% (w/v) complete supplement mixture (CSM) lacking uracil (www.sunrisescience.com, cat. 1004-100), 0.67% yeast nitrogen base (www.difco.com, cat. 291920), and 2% dextrose. Nonselective medium contained 1% yeast extract, 2% peptone (Difco cat. 288620 and 211677, respectively), and either 2% dextrose (YPD) or 2% galactose and 0.2% dextrose (YPG). Nonselective agar YPD plates were purchased from Teknova (cat. Y100). Cultures were grown in plastic 96-deep well plates (www.vwr.com, cat. 29445-166) and glass test tubes for strain maintenance, while 2ml of media in 24-deep well plastic plates (CWR cat. 89080-534) were used for all production runs. Production cultures were spiked with 50 mg/L trans-caryophyllene (sigma cat. C9653) as an internal standard. Plastic plates were covered with aeraseal film (www.excelscientific.com, cat. BS-25) and shaken at 800 rpm in a Multitron shaker

(www.infors-ht.com, model AJ185). Production runs were cultured for 48hr in 2ml of YPG before terpenoid extraction for analysis. Glass tubes were shaken at 200 rpm. All strains were grown at 30 °C.

Confocal microscopy.

To visualize GFP expression of tagged CBS variants in yeast strains, strains were grown in 5 ml YPD overnight, then back-diluted 1:100 into the same medium and grown 3–6 h at 200 rpm and 30 °C. Then, 1 ml of culture volume was centrifuged at 10,000 rpm on a table-top centrifuge, washed with 1x water, and 1ul of the cell pellet was imaged using a Zeiss LSM 710 confocal system mounted on a Zeiss inverted microscope (www.zeiss.com) with a 63Å~ objective and processed using Zeiss Zen software.

Metabolite quantification using GCMS and HPLC-UV.

Yeast cultures grown in 2ml of YPgal in 24-deep well plastic plates for 48 hours were extracted 1:1 with EtOAc spiked with 50mg/L trans-caryophyllene by shaking for 30 minutes, then spun at 14,000 rpm for 1 minute. For GC-MS analysis, the resulting organic phase was removed and transferred to GC vials. An aliquot of the sample (1 ul) was injected into a cyclosil B column (J&W Scientific) operating at a He flow rate of 1 mL/min on GC-MS (GC model 6890, MS model 5973 Inert, Agilent). An initial temperature of 120°C was held for 3 min, followed by ramping to 250°C at a rate of 20°C/min to 250°C, and then held at 250°C for another 3 min. The total flow was set to 8.3 ml/min and helium flow was set to 1 ml/min. For HPLC analysis, the resulting organic phase was removed and dried down at 54C in vacuum, and the extract was redissolved in 500ul of MeOH. 25 µL of the extract was analyzed on an Agilent HPLC 1200 series using a Zorbax Eclipse XDB-C18 column (Agilent, 5-micron, 4.6 mm x 250 mm), kept at 40 C. Mobile phases A and B were water and methanol respectively. A flow of 1ml/min was used. The gradient profile was as follows: 5 min constant at 10% B, a linear gradient from 10% B to 100% B in 10 min, held for 13 min, a second linear gradient from 100% B to 10% B for 1 min, and final step of 10% B maintained for 11 min. The following wavelengths were monitored: 204 nm, 254 nm, 270 nm, and 280 nm, and 270 nm was used for quantification. All production measurements were performed in biological triplicates or quadruplicates. A casbene standard containing known concentrations of the internal standard and casbene extracted from a casbene producing strain was used to determine titer. Farnesol (sigma cat. F203) was used as a standard for singly hydroxylated casbanes, while authentic standards of jolkinol C, 6,9-dihydroxy-5-ketocasbene, and 6-hydroxy-5-ketocasbene were isolated and weighed and verified by H¹ NMR from JWY521 culture to quantify these products of our strains.