International Journal of Research in Engineering and Science (IJRES)
ISSN (Online): 2320-9364, ISSN (Print): 2320-9356
www.ijres.org Volume 13 Issue 8 ǁ August 2025 ǁ PP.155-159

A Review on Innovative Sugar Sources in Fermentation Using Traditional Grapes and Purified Diabetic Urine as Unconventional Alcohol Bases

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Abstract
Fermentation has been a cornerstone of alcohol production for centuries, with grapes serving as the traditional sugar source for winemaking. This review explores both conventional and unconventional sugar sources, comparing natural grape fermentation with an experimental approach using purified diabetic urine in whisky production. Traditional winemaking relies on the natural sugars present in ripe grapes, which undergo yeast-driven fermentation to produce ethanol, aroma compounds, and distinct flavors. In contrast, the unconventional method pioneered by designer James Gilpin extracts glucose from the sugar-rich urine of elderly diabetics. The urine is purified to remove impurities, and the recovered glucose is added to the mash to accelerate fermentation. This unique process raises questions about resource recycling, sustainability, and the boundaries of food innovation. The review examines the biochemical principles, purification technologies, ethical considerations, and potential applications of such fermentation sources. While grape-based fermentation remains rooted in cultural heritage and global commerce, urine-derived sugars demonstrate the possibilities of repurposing biological waste for creative and scientific purposes. These findings highlight the expanding scope of fermentation science, bridging tradition with provocative innovation.
Keywords: *fermentation, grapes, diabetic urine, innovative sugar sources, alcohol production, whisky making, biotechnology, sustainability*

Date of Submission: 14-08-2025 Date of acceptance: 28-08-2025

Objective

The present review is intended to understand how sugar sources, both conventional and unconventional, are being explored in the field of fermentation. Grapes have long served as the foundation of winemaking, offering natural sugars that easily undergo fermentation to yield alcohol with characteristic flavors and aromas. At the same time, new and experimental approaches, such as the use of purified diabetic urine for recovering glucose, are pushing the limits of fermentation science. By placing these two sources side by side, the review aims to explain not only the biochemical and technological aspects of fermentation but also the wider questions of sustainability, cultural acceptance, and ethical considerations. The main objective is to bring together tradition and innovation, showing how familiar practices like grape fermentation continue to thrive, while unusual methods such as urine-derived sugars open up fresh debates about resource use and future possibilities in biotechnology.

I. Introduction

Fermentation is among the oldest and most significant biotechnological processes, with evidence of its practice dating back over 7,000 years in ancient civilisations (McGovern et al., 2004). It involves the microbial conversion of sugars into ethanol, carbon dioxide, and other metabolites, with yeasts, particularly *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, being the principal organisms responsible for alcoholic fermentation (Barnett, 2003; Pretorius, 2020). Over centuries, grapes have remained the classical and dominant substrate for winemaking, owing to their optimal balance of fermentable sugars, organic acids, and micronutrients, which favour efficient yeast metabolism and the development of unique aroma and flavour compounds (Jackson, 2014).

While grape-based fermentation has become a global industry rooted in cultural heritage and commerce, recent years have witnessed growing interest in exploring unconventional sugar sources as alternative substrates. This trend has been driven by sustainability concerns, resource optimization, and a push toward innovative biotechnological application (Stewart, 2017). A notable and provocative example is the experimental work of James Gilpin, who demonstrated the extraction of glucose from the urine of elderly diabetic patients, purifying it

to eliminate impurities and reintroducing the recovered sugar into whisky fermentation (Gilpin, 2010). Although highly unconventional, this approach underscores the potential for recycling biological waste materials into useful resources.

The concept of employing non-traditional substrates in fermentation is not entirely new, as earlier studies have examined the use of agro-industrial byproducts, starchy residues, and plant waste as alternative sugar sources (Soccol et al., 2017). However, the deliberate use of human-derived waste products raises complex debates surrounding food safety, cultural acceptability, and bioethics (Nordgren, 2012). Such examples push the boundaries of fermentation science by challenging the conventional notions of what constitutes a "suitable" substrate while simultaneously opening discussions about circular economy and sustainable resource management.

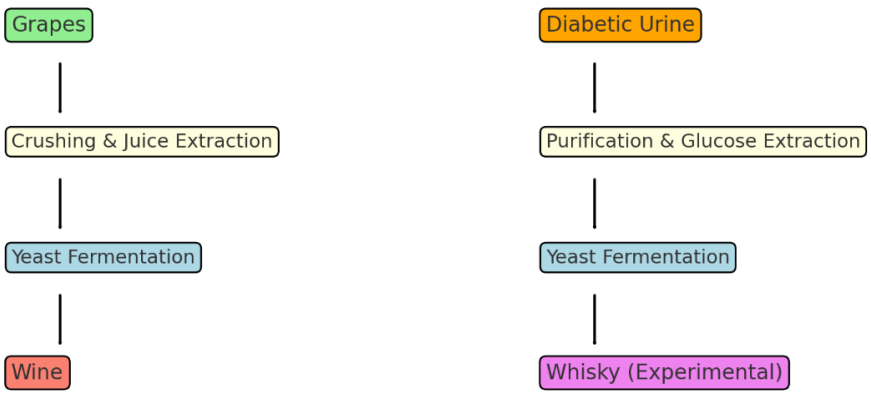
In this context, the present review examines both the traditional grape-based fermentation process and the unconventional method of utilizing purified diabetic urine as a glucose source. It aims to highlight the biochemical foundations, technological advances, ethical challenges, and future possibilities of integrating such innovative approaches into fermentation science.

II. Raw Material Selection

The choice of raw material is central to any fermentation process, as it determines the availability of fermentable sugars, nutrient balance, and overall efficiency of alcohol production. Traditionally, **grapes** have served as the most important substrate for winemaking because of their naturally high sugar content, primarily glucose and fructose, which provide an ideal balance for yeast metabolism. In addition, grapes offer essential organic acids, tannins, and micronutrients that support fermentation while contributing to the aroma, flavor, and sensory quality of the final product (Jackson, 2014; Ribéreau-Gayon et al., 2006). Their composition is highly suited for *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, the yeast most commonly used in winemaking, resulting in a stable and predictable fermentation process.

In contrast, **urine from diabetic patients** represents a highly unconventional but sugar-rich biological source. In individuals with diabetes mellitus, excess glucose is excreted through urine (glycosuria), and this waste stream has been experimentally explored as a potential sugar substrate (Gilpin, 2010). When purified to remove urea, salts, and other metabolic by-products, the glucose recovered from diabetic urine can be reintroduced into a fermentation mash to support yeast growth and ethanol production. While not naturally associated with cultural or sensory traditions, this biological waste offers an intriguing possibility for resource recycling and sustainable innovation. However, it also raises questions of safety, ethics, and consumer acceptance that must be addressed before any practical application in alcohol production can be considered (Nordgren, 2012). (Fig-1).

Figure 1 – Schematic Diagram of Fermentation from Different Sugar Sources



Thus, while grapes represent the conventional plant-based source rooted in heritage and sensory value, diabetic urine demonstrates a provocative waste-derived alternative, highlighting the contrasting pathways through which fermentable sugars can be sourced for alcoholic fermentation. (Table-1)

Table 1 – Comparison of Raw Material Characteristics

Parameter	Grapes (Traditional)	Purified Diabetic Urine (Unconventional)
Primary Sugar Source	Glucose and fructose (natural plant sugars)	Glucose extracted from diabetic urine
Preparation	Crushing and juice extraction	Purification, water treatment, glucose recovery
Nutrient Balance	Balanced with organic acids, vitamins, and phenolics	Lacks natural nutrients, mainly glucose
Cultural Acceptance	Widely accepted, traditional, global use	Controversial, experimental, limited acceptance
Applications	Winemaking, food industry, commerce	Experimental whisky, sustainability/art projects

3. Purification/Preparation

The preparation of raw materials plays a crucial role in ensuring the efficiency and safety of fermentation. The steps differ significantly between conventional grape-based substrates and unconventional urine-derived sugars.

Grapes undergo a relatively straightforward preparation process. Harvested fruits are first **crushed and pressed** to release the juice, which contains fermentable sugars, organic acids, and essential nutrients required by yeast (Ribéreau-Gayon et al., 2006). The must (freshly pressed grape juice with skins and seeds) may then be clarified or treated depending on the desired wine style. This preparation ensures that the juice provides a clean, balanced medium for fermentation by *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*.

Urine-derived glucose, on the other hand, requires a more complex purification process. In diabetic patients, high concentrations of glucose are excreted in urine (glycosuria), but this fluid also contains salts, urea, creatinine, and other waste metabolites that are unsuitable for fermentation. To make it usable, urine must first undergo **water treatment and sterilisation**, often through filtration, activated carbon treatment, or membrane separation techniques (Al-Amoudi, 2010). The glucose is then extracted and purified, typically through chromatographic separation or enzymatic treatment, to isolate fermentable sugars while eliminating unwanted compounds (Gilpin, 2010). Only after this intensive preparation can the recovered glucose be safely incorporated into a fermentation mash.

Thus, grape preparation involves simple mechanical processing rooted in tradition, while urine requires advanced purification and biochemical treatment to recover usable sugars. This contrast underscores both the practicality of conventional fermentation substrates and the technological challenges of transforming unconventional biological waste into a viable fermentation resource.

III. Fermentation

Fermentation represents the core stage in alcohol production, where fermentable sugars are converted into ethanol, carbon dioxide, and a wide range of secondary metabolites that contribute to aroma and flavor. In traditional winemaking, grape must is inoculated with selected strains of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* or relies on naturally occurring yeasts present on grape skins and in the winery environment (Fleet, 2003). The yeast metabolizes glucose and fructose under anaerobic conditions through glycolysis and alcoholic fermentation, producing ethanol along with higher alcohols, esters, and organic acids that impart sensory complexity (Pretorius, 2020).

In contrast, when **urine-derived glucose** is used, the fermentation principle remains the same, but the substrate is added only after undergoing purification to remove contaminants. The recovered glucose is mixed into a fermentation mash, where yeast is inoculated to initiate ethanol production (Gilpin, 2010). Although this system can accelerate fermentation due to the availability of a simple sugar, its application remains largely experimental and symbolic, raising questions about reproducibility, safety, and social acceptance.

IV. Maturation

Following fermentation, alcoholic beverages typically undergo a maturation or aging process to stabilize the product and enhance sensory qualities. In winemaking, wines are aged in stainless steel tanks or oak barrels, during which complex chemical transformations occur, including the polymerization of phenolic compounds and the slow development of flavor profiles (Jackson, 2014). Similarly, whiskies are matured in oak casks for extended periods, allowing interactions between ethanol, wood compounds, and oxygen to generate the characteristic color, aroma, and smoothness of the final spirit (Conner et al., 1999).

In the case of urine-derived whisky experiments, maturation follows conventional whisky-aging practices once fermentation is complete. However, because the sugar source differs, questions arise about whether the base material influences long-term flavour development or consumer perception. While chemically the ethanol produced is identical regardless of sugar origin, cultural and ethical considerations play a defining role in the acceptance of such products. (Table-2)

Table 2: Comparison of Fermentation and Maturation Processes

Parameter	Grapes (Traditional)	Purified Diabetic Urine (Unconventional)
Fermentation Substrate	Natural grape juice is rich in sugars, acids, and tannins	A glucose solution obtained after purification of urine
Yeast Addition	Saccharomyces cerevisiae (commonly used wine yeast)	Same yeast strains; tested in controlled conditions
Fermentation Dynamics	Balanced fermentation due to nutrient-rich medium	Requires nutrient supplementation for yeast growth
Alcohol Yield	High yield, consistent with traditional processes	Variable yield depending on glucose concentration
Maturation	Oak barrels, stainless steel, controlled environments	Still experimental; methods borrowed from whisky aging
Flavor Profile	Complex, rich, culturally established	Unpredictable, experimental, under research

V. Applications

The applications of fermentation products vary widely depending on the choice of raw material, with grapes and urine-derived glucose representing two contrasting ends of the spectrum.

Grapes have been central to human culture, cuisine, and economy for millennia. Wine production from grapes is deeply rooted in religious traditions, social customs, and culinary practices across the world (McGovern, 2003). Beyond cultural importance, the global wine industry represents a multibillion-dollar economic sector that supports agriculture, trade, and tourism (Anderson & Pinilla, 2018). Grapes are therefore not only a source of fermentable sugars but also a symbol of heritage and continuity, where fermentation science aligns with tradition and commerce.

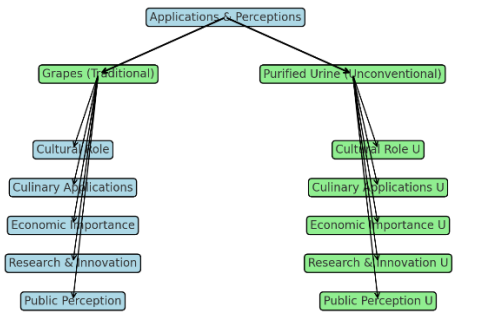
In stark contrast, **urine-derived whisky** does not occupy a mainstream culinary or economic niche but functions instead as a form of experimental art and critical design. James Gilpin's *Family Whisky Project* (2010) demonstrated how glucose extracted from diabetic urine could be repurposed into whisky fermentation, not as a product for mass consumption but as a commentary on aging, health, sustainability, and waste reuse. Such applications extend beyond beverage production into the realm of **public engagement**, sparking debate on bioethics, recycling, and the boundaries of food innovation (Nordgren, 2012). Furthermore, the concept aligns with **sustainability research**, encouraging exploration of unconventional biological waste streams as potential resources within a circular economy framework.(Table-3).

Table 3 Applications and Societal Perception

Aspect	Grapes (Traditional)	Purified Diabetic Urine (Unconventional)
Cultural Role	Deep-rooted in rituals, festivals, and global traditions	Limited acceptance; often viewed with scepticism or taboo
Culinary Applications	Widely used in wines, desserts, and gourmet cooking	Experimental, not yet part of mainstream cuisine
Economic Importance	Significant industry with global markets and exports	No established market; explored in sustainability research
Research & Innovation	Ongoing improvements in viticulture and fermentation	Investigated for circular economy and bio-resource utilization
Public Perception	Positive, associated with heritage and luxury	Controversial; raises ethical, health, and cultural concerns

Thus, while grape-based fermentation continues to thrive as a cultural and economic cornerstone, urine-derived whisky remains a provocative example that challenges social norms and stimulates discourse on the future possibilities of biotechnology and sustainable fermentation.

Figure 2 – Conceptual Framework of Applications and Perceptions



VI. Conclusion

Fermentation has evolved from an ancient practice rooted in tradition to a modern field that embraces both cultural heritage and scientific innovation. Grapes continue to serve as the classical substrate for alcohol production, valued for their natural sugar content, balanced chemistry, and long-standing cultural, culinary, and economic importance. In contrast, the use of purified diabetic urine as a sugar source for whisky represents a provocative departure from convention, positioned more as an experimental art project than a commercial endeavour. While chemically both substrates provide fermentable sugars that yeast can convert into ethanol, their symbolic and social meanings diverge sharply.

The comparison of these two raw materials highlights the versatility of fermentation science and its potential to adapt to diverse substrates. Grapes demonstrate the continuity of tradition and global commerce, while urine-derived sugars underscore the possibilities of recycling biological waste within the context of sustainability research and public engagement. Together, they reveal how fermentation can bridge the familiar with the unconventional, stimulating dialogue about the future of biotechnology, resource management, and societal acceptance. Ultimately, this review suggests that while grapes will remain at the heart of winemaking, unconventional substrates such as urine-derived glucose expand the horizons of fermentation, pushing boundaries and inviting reflection on the role of science, ethics, and innovation in shaping the future of alcohol production.

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