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Measurement of Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) of Individual and Combinations of Essential Oil Volatiles in Food

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Abstract

The use of essential oil volatiles as natural food preservatives has received significant attention in recent years. Shelf life extension can be achieved through the appropriate design of active packaging systems that release volatiles into the product headspace at controlled rates. In some applications, the volatile concentrations required to delay or prevent spoilage can cause sensory changes to the product. The use of multiple volatiles and the potential for synergistic effects offer opportunities to minimise sensory effects in the pursuit of shelf life extension. The design of these systems requires a good knowledge of the target headspace volatile concentrations required to inhibit growth.

The aim of this research was to analyse the methods for measurement of minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) for individual and mixtures of essential oil volatiles in food systems. Carvacrol and thymol, the predominant phenolic constituents of *Origanum vulgare* and *Thymus vulgaris* were selected as example active agents. Both are known to have strong antimicrobial activity.

The accuracy of the techniques normally applied to measure MICs against targeted microorganisms in the headspace is questionable. Volatile compounds released into the test headspace are absorbed by media and dish materials and lost into the environment. As such the MIC data collected are difficult to interpret and can even exceed saturated vapour pressures of the volatile compounds.

To demonstrate this, the Petri dish reversed method headspace dynamics was characterised during standard MIC tests. Factors influencing the sorption of volatiles by the culture media (Potato Dextrose Agar) and other parts of the system were investigated. The concentrations of antimicrobial compounds in the headspace were quantified using gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS). The study showed that very low concentrations were found during MIC measurement and that the concentrations changed dynamically during the incubation period. The results demonstrated that absorption of vapour by the Potato Dextrose Agar (PDA) strongly influenced the headspace dynamics and was the main reason for the low volatile concentrations in the headspace.

The partitioning of carvacrol and thymol ($K_{A/W}$ values 5.94×10^{-5} and 2.58×10^{-4} respectively) strongly favour the solid phase, providing a basis for the design of a new method to enable better MIC measurement. A new method based on pre-mixing the volatile compound into the liquid media was developed. Testing showed that headspace volatile concentrations quickly stabilised and remained constant throughout the incubation period, making MIC determination easier.

The potential of each compound and their binary combinations to inhibit growth were evaluated using the new MIC measurement method. This resulted in very repeatable results with much lower headspace concentrations than measured using traditional methods. To test for synergistic effects in the multiple volatile trials, an alternative data analysis approach was adopted. The inhibition time before growth observed in each sample was linearized and regressed against the thymol and carvacrol concentrations. This resulted in a simple model with a significant thymol/carcacrol interaction term, clearly demonstrating a synergistic, although minor effect. The study showed the measurement of stable and repeatable MIC values for individual and combinations of volatiles is possible using the new method. These findings strengthen the possibility of using natural essential oils as alternatives to chemicals to preserve food products.

The key disadvantage of the new method is the requirement to mix the liquid essential oils directly into the liquid media before solidification. This prevents its application to solid food systems. For solid food systems, a system capable of delivering stable flows of air with volatiles at high concentrations in the presence of high relative humidity was designed. With this system, well-controlled and stable air compositions were achieved over two days, making the system suitable for measurement of the inhibitory effects on spoilage organism growth. Although further optimisation of the design and control of this system is required, it has the potential for collection of accurate target headspace conditions for controlled volatile release active packaging design.

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Table of Content

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgment	iii
List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xiv
List of Abbreviations	xix
CHAPTER 1	1
PROJECT BACKGROUND.....	1
CHAPTER 2	5
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 Overview of Active Packaging System Technologies for Food Products	5
2.2.1 Active Antimicrobial Packaging System	8
2.2.2 Antimicrobial Packaging Using Gas-Based Systems.....	12
2.2.3 Design of Volatile Release Systems	17
2.3 Essential Oils and their Antimicrobial Properties	18
2.3.1 Mechanism of Antimicrobial Agents.....	22
2.3.2 The Use of Volatiles as Antimicrobial Agents	25
2.3.3 Minimum Inhibitory Concentration.....	29
2.3.3.1 Conventional Methods	32
2.3.3.1.1 The Agar Diffusion Method.....	32
2.3.3.1.2 The Dilution Method	33
2.3.3.2 Non- Conventional Methods.....	34
2.3.3.2.1 Micro Atmosphere Method	34
2.3.3.2.2 Turbidimetry	35
2.3.3.2.3 Bioimpedimetric Method	35
2.3.3.3 Application to vapour phase measurement	36
2.3.4 Synergistic Effects	45
2.3.4.1 Antimicrobial Interaction Measurement (Methods for Identifying if Synergy Exists)	49
2.4 Conclusion.....	59

CHAPTER 3	61
SELECTION OF A MINIMUM INHIBITORY CONCENTRATION (MIC) STANDARD SYSTEM	61
3.1 Introduction	61
3.2 Experimental Section	62
3.2.1 Screening of Antifungal on Minimum Inhibitory Concentration	62
3.2.2 Materials and Methods	63
3.2.2.1 Chemical Information	63
3.2.2.2 Preparation of Strain and Spores Suspension.....	63
3.2.2.3 Samples Preparation.....	63
3.2.3 Results and Discussion.....	65
3.2.4 Summary Findings.....	69
3.3 Determination of Carvacrol Minimum Inhibitory Concentration	69
3.3.1 Materials and Methods	70
3.3.1.1 Sample Preparation.	70
3.3.2 Results and Discussion.....	71
3.3.3 Conclusion.....	76
CHAPTER 4	77
CHARACTERISING THE MINIMUM INHIBITORY CONCENTRATION (MIC) MEASUREMENT SYSTEM	77
4.1 Introduction	77
4.2 Characterization of the Headspace Dynamics for Carvacrol Vapour Release in Polystyrene Petri dishes.....	78
4.2.1 Materials and Methods	78
4.2.1.1 Chemicals	78
4.2.1.2 Experimental Device	78
4.2.1.3 Media and Sample Preparation	80
4.2.1.4 Headspace Dynamics Characterisation.....	81
4.2.1.5 Headspace Measurement.....	82
4.2.1.6 Statistical Analysis.....	84

4.3.1 Results and Discussion.....	85
4.3.2 Summary Findings.....	90
4.3 Determination of the Desorption Isotherm for Carvacrol and Filter paper	90
4.3.1 Materials and Method	91
4.3.2 Results and Discussion.....	94
4.3.3 Summary Findings.....	96
4.4 Partition Coefficient.....	97
4.4.1 Materials and Methods	98
4.4.2 Results and Discussion.....	99
4.5 Conclusion.....	103
CHAPTER 5	104
MEASURING MINIMUM INHIBITION CONCENTRATION: NEW METHOD DEVELOPMENT ..	104
5.1 Introduction	104
5.2 Closed System MIC Measurement Method Development	105
5.2.1 Selecting the Required PDA Volume.....	106
5.2.2 Testing for Adequate Oxygen Availability.....	109
5.2.3 Oxygen Measurement	110
5.2.4 Results and Discussion.....	113
5.2.5 Summary Findings.....	117
5.3 Determination of Carvacrol Minimum Inhibitory Concentration	117
5.3.1 Material and Methods	117
5.3.1.1 Antimicrobial Assay.....	118
5.3.1.2 Experimental Design	118
5.3.2 Results and Discussion.....	120
5.3.3 Summary findings	131
5.4 Determination of Thymol Minimum Inhibitory Concentration	132
5.4.1 Materials and Methods	132

5.4.2	Experimental Design	132
5.4.3	Results and Discussion	132
5.4.4	Summary Findings.....	133
5.5	Conclusion.....	133
CHAPTER 6	134
MINIMUM INHIBITORY CONCENTRATION IN MULTIPLE VOLATILE SYSTEMS		
6.1	Introduction	134
6.2	Materials and Methods.....	135
6.2.1	Inhibition of <i>Botrytis Cinerea</i> by Individual and Combined Compounds	136
6.2.2	Experimental Design	138
6.2.3	Statistical Analysis.....	140
6.3	Results and Discussion	141
6.3.1	Determination of MIC Values of Individual Compounds	141
6.4	Synergy Measurement.....	144
6.5	Conclusions	156
CHAPTER 7	158
VOLATILE GENERATION SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT		
7.1	Introduction	158
7.2	System Requirements	159
7.2.1	Volatile Properties	160
7.3	Idea Generation and Concept Screening	167
7.4	Detailed Design of the Volatile Generation System.....	174
7.5	The Experimental Setup and Lab View Program.....	178
7.6	Testing the System.....	183
7.7	Application of Vapour Generator to MIC Measurement.....	190
7.8	Conclusion.....	193

CHAPTER 8	194
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	194
References	204
List of Appendices	224

List of Figures

Figure 2-1: Food packaging systems and relative behaviour of active substance (Redrawn from Han (2000).....	11
Figure 2-2: Structure formulae of selected components of essential oils.	19
Figure 2-3: Locations and mechanisms in the bacterial cell thought to be sites of action of essential oil components: degradation of the cell wall (Helander <i>et al.</i> , 1998); damage to cytoplasmic membrane (Sikkema <i>et al.</i> , 1994; Ultee <i>et al.</i> , 2000a; Ultee <i>et al.</i> , 2002); damage to membrane proteins (Ultee <i>et al.</i> , 1999); leakage of cell contents (Helander <i>et al.</i> , 1998); coagulation of cytoplasm and depletion of the proton motive force (Ultee <i>et al.</i> , 1999; Ultee and Smid, 2001).....	23
Figure 2-4: Common methods to measure antimicrobial or antifungal activity.	31
Figure 2-5: Isobolograms displaying the three types of results possible with combinations of antimicrobials (adapted from Davidson and Parish, 1986)	53
Figure 3-1: Photograph illustrating the effect of volatile compounds on <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> growth. (Incubation period: 3 days, temperature: 25° C).....	66
Figure 3-2: Photograph illustrating the effects of volatile compounds on the growth of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> after up to 18 days incubation, (Temperature: 25°C).....	68
Figure 3-3: Illustration of Petri dish setup to determine the minimum inhibitory concentration in the vapour phase in this work based on the common micro-atmosphere method (Inverted Petri dish method).	70
Figure 3-4: Photograph illustrating the effect of carvacrol volatile on the growth of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> after 5 days incubation (temperature: 25°C). Letters A-J denotes different added carvacrol additions as defined in Table 3.2.	72
Figure 3-5: Photograph illustrating the effect of carvacrol volatile at concentrations on the growth of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> after 6 days incubation (temperature: 25°C). Letters E-J denote different added carvacrol additions as defined in Table 3.2.....	73
Figure 4-1: Images of the experimental setup to sample the headspace generated by the active compound in the Petri dishes. a) Schematic diagram, b) and c) photographs of example dishes.	79
Figure 4-2: Schematic representation of the experimental aluminium dishes.....	80
Figure 4-3: The dish configurations.....	81

Figure 4-4:	Snapshot of carvacrol concentration using GCMS –QP2010 Series software.	83
Figure 4-5:	The profiles of the headspace carvacrol concentration change in the dishes over time (days) with and without PDA (Vertical bars represent the average \pm standard error of duplicate measurement).....	87
Figure 4-6:	Sample preparation to determine the filter paper isotherm of carvacrol	92
Figure 4-7:	Experimental data and the curve-fitted equilibrium carvacrol concentration in the filter paper against carvacrol relative vapour pressure in the bottle headspace.....	94
Figure 4-8:	Illustration of sample and the phase in the Wheaton bottle as they relate to the partition coefficient	97
Figure 4-9:	Carvacrol partitioning, (mol/m^3 air) vs ($\text{mol}/\text{m}^3_{\text{PDA}}$). Measurement of the gas phase in the sample vials was performed after the samples were stored at 25°C overnight. (Direct Method: Vapour Phase Calibration method)	100
Figure 4-10:	Thymol partitioning (mol/m^3 air) vs ($\text{mol}/\text{m}^3_{\text{PDA}}$). Measurement of the gas phase in the sample vials were performed after the samples were stored at 25°C overnight (Direct Method: Vapour Phase Calibration method).....	100
Figure 5-1:	Profiles carvacrol volume (μL) against carvacrol relative vapour pressure at a different volume of PDA in 120 mL Wheaton bottle.	107
Figure 5-2:	Profile fraction carvacrol concentration in PDA drop due to desorption, $C_{\text{PDA}}/C_{\text{PDA},i}$ against PDA volume (mL)	108
Figure 5-3:	(a) Ocean optics oxygen measurement system and (b) Foxy oxygen probe for the analysis	110
Figure 5-4:	Plot of Lifetime against volumetric concentration	112
Figure 5-5:	Plot of the two point calibration oxygen versus time in 120 mL Wheaton glassbottle headspace. The profiles show the oxygen concentration in the bottle headspace was up to 21.0% when dry air was introduced and plunged to 0.0% when dry air was replaced by pure nitrogen at time 300 seconds onwards	113
Figure 5-6:	Profiles oxygen concentration (%), temperature ($^\circ\text{C}$) and Lifetime in the glass control Wheaton bottle (100mL headspace in potato dextrose agar incubated at $25 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$).....	114

Figure 5-7:	The profiles of the concentration of oxygen (%), temperature (°C) in the Wheaton bottle (100mL headspace) inoculated with <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> in potato dextrose agar incubated at 25 ± 1 °C.....	115
Figure 5-8:	Observed growth in Wheaton bottle A and B (PDA inoculated with <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> , C (PDA-control) and incubated at 25 ± 1 °C. (a) The photograph was taken after one-day incubation (b) the photograph taken after 4 days incubation.....	116
Figure 5-9:	Summary diagram of all tests for determination of the minimum inhibitory concentration of the antimicrobial agent, carvacrol against <i>Botrytis cinerea</i>	119
Figure 5-10:	The photographic result indicates there was no sign of growth except for the control inoculated with the inoculums after 6 days storage at 25°C (Test 1)	122
Figure 5-11:	The photographic results of Test 2 at concentrations 0 – 150 ppm.....	124
Figure 5-12:	The photographic results of Test 3 at concentrations of 0 – 30 ppm after 3 days incubation at 25 ± 1 °C	127
Figure 5-13:	The photographic results of Test 4 in the concentration range 0 – 60 ppm	129
Figure 5-14:	Photograph showing at 50 ppm concentration (bottle 3 a,b,c) no sign of growth of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> was observed in 120mL Wheaton glass bottles compared to Petri dishes in which growth was observed after 4 days incubation period (Test 4)	130
Figure 5-15:	Photographic showing at 60 ppm concentration (bottle 4a) no sign of growth of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> was observed in 120mL Wheaton glass bottle compared to Polystyrenes dish where growth was observed after 7 days incubation period (Test 4).....	130
Figure 6-1:	Summary diagram of all tests for determination of minimum inhibitory concentration of the antimicrobial agent, individual and combined carvacrol and thymol against <i>Botrytis cinerea</i>	140
Figure 6-2:	(a) P value more than 0.05 indicates the data is normally distributed.	153
Figure 6-3:	Effect of thymol and carvacrol alone and in combination on <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> growth (days) on PDA media stored at 25 °C.	154

Figure 7-1:	Comparison of carvacrol vapour pressure profiles derived from different sources of data. The experimental data was obtained from Stull (1947) and Yaw (2007) and predicted results (solid line) were derived from the fitted Antoine equations.	163
Figure 7-2:	Comparison of carvacrol vapour pressure profiles derived from different sources. The experimental data was obtained from Stull (1947), Van Roon (2002) and Yaw (2007) and predicted results (solid lines) were derived from the Antoine equation while the dotted line (red) was derived from Antoine - Grains equation.	166
Figure 7-3:	Illustration of experiments conducted to get the required relative humidity in flow through system.	168
Figure 7-4:	Results of an experiment for the volatile flow through experimental setups A, B and C defined in Figure 7-3 (dry air flow rate 45mL/min; Temperature 25°C).	169
Figure 7-5:	Results of extended experiment C (defined in Figure 7-3) (saturated salt solution – carvacrol oil – RH sensor) for the volatile flow through system (dry air flow rate 45mL/min; temperature 25°C).	170
Figure 7-6:	Illustration of water/carcacrol oil emulsion in this experiment.	171
Figure 7-7:	Proposed improved volatile generation system	171
Figure 7-8:	Theoretical mass balance of water and carvacrol vapour in the carvacrol delivery system at T_1 and $T_2 = 25^\circ\text{C}$	172
Figure 7-9:	The ideal system for the volatile generating system.	173
Figure 7-10:	Schematic diagram of the volatile generating system.	175
Figure 7-11:	Theoretical carvacrol vapour delivery system mass balance of humidity from saturated Magnesium Chloride (MgCl_2) at different mass flow fraction (MFC2/MFC1) at $T_1=25^\circ\text{C}$, 45°C and 50°C ; and $T_2 = 25^\circ\text{C}$. (b) is the same as (a) but with smaller x-axis scale.	177
Figure 7-12:	Analogue inputs and front panel of Lab View programme	179
Figure 7-13:	General experimental setup for the experiments	180

Figure 7-14:	Example experimental data of bubble column operation with saturated salt solutions MgCl_2 (0 -2 h), NaCl_2 (2- 6 h) and pure water (6 h plus) at 25°C measured in the Aluminium Dish	184
Figure 7-15:	Effect of mass flow fraction against the relative humidity in the system headspace. Legend represent $F_{\text{crv}}:F_{\text{h}}$ ($T_1 = 25^\circ\text{C}$, $T_2 = 25^\circ\text{C}$, $F_{\text{crv}}:F_{\text{h}} = 15:15$, $15:60$, $15:120$, $5:100$ mL / min) (note F_{crv} was effectively dry air as no carvacrol oil was present in the bubble column).	185
Figure 7-16:	Experimental data to determine the effect of mass flow fraction against the relative humidity in the aluminium dish headspace. Legend represent $F_{\text{crv}}:F_{\text{h}}$ ($T_1 = 50^\circ\text{C}$, $T_2 = 25^\circ\text{C}$, $F_{\text{crv}}:F_{\text{h}} = 15:15$, $15:50$ and $15:100\text{mL} / \text{min}$	186
Figure 7-17:	Experimental data of relative humidity (%) in the system (Aluminium Dish) at various ratios of F_{crv} and F_{h} and the predicted curve obtained by mass balance. Each data point was an average of 3 hours at equilibrium state (at frequency 20 seconds per data, $N = 540$).	187
Figure 7-18:	Experimental data of relative humidity (%) and relative carvacrol vapour pressure in the system (Aluminium Dish) at various ratios of $F_{\text{crv}}/F_{\text{h}}$ (1(14:14), 0.22 (14:64), 0.13 (14:112) and the descriptive curve obtained by mass balance. Each point of carvacrol concentration was an average of three measurements and humidity experimental data was calculated as an average. $T_1 = 50^\circ\text{C}$ and $T_2, 25^\circ\text{C}$	188
Figure 7-19:	Plot of $P_{\text{crv}}/P_{\text{crv,sat}}$, Temperature ($^\circ\text{C}$) and Relative Humidity against Time (hour) of the carvacrol volatile delivery system. ($T_1, 50^\circ\text{C}$, Water bath; $T_2, 25^\circ\text{C}$, Aluminium Dish); $\text{MFC1} = 100.0$ mL/min; $\text{MFC2} = 14.0$ mL/min). ...	189
Figure 7-20:	Carvacrol concentration at sampling point 1(SP1, inlet) and in the sampling point (SP2, outlet) of the system delivery	190
Figure 7-21:	Carvacrol concentration in the aluminium dish headspace.....	192

List of Tables

Table 2-1:	Examples of active packaging systems (Suppakul <i>et al.</i> , 2003; Ozdemir and Floros, 2004).	7
Table 2-2:	The number of Articles in SCI journal published in international journals during 1991 to present (Dec 2013) through Keyword Science citation index.	9
Table 2-3:	Some of the developments of films using thyme and oregano oils and its major constituents carvacrol and thymol, reported in literature	14
Table 2-4:	Summary of active packaging systems that can release active compounds into the package headspace and their reported application in the food product..	16
Table 2-5:	Major component of essential oils that exhibit antibacterial properties.	21
Table 2-6:	Terms used in antibacterial testing.....	30
Table 2-7:	Some of the method used to determine antimicrobial activities with vapour contact assay.....	38
Table 2-8:	Selected ^a MICs of essential oil components tested in vitro against food borne and airborne pathogens (adapted from Burt 2004 and Hyldgaard <i>et al.</i> (2012)).	41
Table 2-9:	Examples of reported vapour phase MICs for essential oils or active compounds.	42
Table 2-10:	Box vapours assay and agar diffusion assay of essential oils constituents against <i>T. mentagrophytes</i> TIMM2789	44
Table 2-11:	Combination of components and their antimicrobial interactions against several microorganisms using the checkerboard method.....	48
Table 2-12:	Ratio of combined compounds and percentage of effective reduction concentration by synergy as compared with the individual components (Bassole <i>et al.</i> ,2012).	49
Table 2-13:	Examples of various fractional inhibitory concentration (FIC) indexes used to determine the type of interactions.....	52

Table 2-14:	MICs (mg/L) of essential oil in vapour phase effective against selected bacteria. The MIC is expressed as microliters of essential oils per unit of the atmosphere above the organism growing on the agar surface.	54
Table 2-15:	MICs (mg/L _{air}) of major components of sweet basil, peppermint, and clove and cinnamon essential oil in vapour phase effective against selected bacteria and fungi. The MICs is expressed as milligram (mg) of essential oils major components per unit of the atmosphere (L) above the organism growing on the agar surface.....	57
Table 3-1:	Antifungal investigations of active compounds using the agar diffusion method after three days at 25 °C	66
Table 3-2:	Results after 10 days incubation at 25 °C.	74
Table 3-3:	Minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) of carvacrol against <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> incubated at 25 °C tested by micro-atmosphere method.	75
Table 4-1:	Analysis of variance for carvacrol concentration in the dishes headspace with time as a covariate.	85
Table 4-2:	Grouping Information Using Bonferroni Method and 95.0% Confidence Level	85
Table 4-3:	Dataset for the carvacrol isotherm	93
Table 4-4:	Vapour-liquid partition coefficient, K_{aw} experimental results from the literature as well as quantitative structure-property relationship (QSPR) estimates, K at 25°C.	102
Table 5-1:	Example summary of the results of the oxygen sensor calibration.....	112
Table 5-2:	Concentration of carvacrol ranges studied in MIC determination	119
Table 5-3:	Results of screening of carvacrol MIC determination (Test 1).....	121
Table 5-4:	Results of screening of carvacrol MIC determination (Test 2).....	123
Table 5-5:	Results of screening of carvacrol MIC determination (Test 3).....	126
Table 5-6:	Results of screening of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> MIC determination (Test 4)	128

Table 5-7:	Summary of the inhibitory of the growth of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> at different concentrations of carvacrol incubated at $25 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$	131
Table 5-8:	Summary of the inhibitory of the growth of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> at different concentrations of thymol incubated at $25 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$	133
Table 6-1:	Concentration of carvacrol and thymol studied in MIC determination for the individual component on their own.....	138
Table 6-2:	Second set of the concentration of six combination ratios studied for MIC determination.	139
Table 6-3:	Final set experimental design ratios of thymol and carvacrol in this work ...	139
Table 6-4:	Summary of the results of the delayed growth of <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> at various concentrations of thymol and carvacrol alone and in combination. The delayed time was measured by subtracting the days for first visible growth in the control bottle from the days visible growth in the treatment bottle.	142
Table 6-5:	Repeated antimicrobial measurement of various antimicrobial concentrations of carvacrol and thymol individually on <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> stored at 25°C Potato Dextrose Agar medium	143
Table 6-6:	Dataset 1. Antimicrobial measurement of various combined concentrations of carvacrol and thymol on <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> stored at 25°C on potato dextrose agar medium.	145
Table 6-7:	Dataset 2. Antimicrobial measurement of various combined concentrations of carvacrol and thymol on <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> stored at 25°C potato dextrose agar medium.	146
Table 6-8:	Fractional inhibitory concentration index of carvacrol and thymol against <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> at a total combination 40 and 50 ppm.	148
Table 6-9:	Fractional inhibitory concentration index of carvacrol and thymol against <i>Botrytis cinerea</i> at various total combination 25 to 60ppm (Applied to dataset 2).	148
Table 6-10:	Summary of the regression analysis.....	150
Table 6-11:	Analysis of variance for carvacrol and thymol.....	150
Table 6-12:	ANOVA table.....	150

Table 7-1:	Antoine constants of carvacrol	161
Table 7-2:	Summary of carvacrol vapour pressure reported at 25 °C in literature and derived from the Antoine equation	162
Table 7-3:	Antoine-Grain constants for carvacrol.....	165
Table 7-4:	Configuration set up of Lab View Lab View Signal Express before Temperature and RH sensor calibration	182

List of Abbreviations

AI	Antifungal index
A_{GC}^i	Area of gas chromatogram peak from the injected volume of sample (Area).
CFU	Colony forming unit
C^i	Concentration of volatile organic compound (VOC) i , ($\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-3}$)
C_{crv}	Carvacrol concentration (mol/m^3)
DT	Detection time
EO	Essential oil
EVOH	Ethylene vinyl alcohol
FIC	Fractional inhibition concentration
Fh	Dry air flow rate for humidity (mL/min)
Fcrv	Dry air flow for carvacrol (mL/min)
FM	Mixture of dry air flow of carvacrol and humidity (mL/min)
GCMS	Gas chromatography–mass spectrometry
HDPE	High-density polyethylene
K_{GC}^i	Detector response or slope ($\text{mol}\cdot\text{Area}^{-1}$) of a standard curve of VOC i .
LDPE	Low-density polyethylene
MAP	Modified atmosphere packaging
MFC1	Mass Flow Controller (mL/min) , humidity
MFC2	Mass Flow Controller (mL/min) , carvacrol liquid
MIC	Minimum inhibitory concentration
MLC	Minimum lethal concentration
OD	Optical density
OPP	Oriented Polypropylene

PD	Petri dish
PDA	Potato dextrose agar
PE	Polyethylene
PP	Polypropylene
ppm	Part per million
Psat	Saturated Vapour Pressure (Pa)
P _{crv}	Partial Vapour Pressure for Carvacrol
P _h	Humidity Vapour Pressure (Pa)
P _h /P _{h,sat} (T ₂)	Humidity relative vapour pressure (Pa) at T ₂ °C
P _{crv} /P _{crv,sat} (T ₂)	Carvacrol relative vapour pressure (Pa) at T ₂ °C
RH	Relative humidity, (%)
RH _M	Relative humidity after mixture of carvacrol (%)
RH ₂	Relative humidity at room temperature
<i>Sp</i>	Species
SPI	Soy protein isolate
T ₁	Water bath temperature (°C)
T ₂	Room temperature (25.0 ±1.0°C)
T _m	Temperature in mixing vessel (°C)
v/v	Volume per volume
<i>Vol_{inj}</i>	Injection volume of sample (m ³)
UV	Ultra-violet
w/w	Weight per weight