

Relief from nitrogen starvation entails quick unexpected down-regulation of glycolytic/lipid metabolism genes in enological *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*

Tesnière Catherine¹, Bessière Chloé¹, Pradal Martine¹, Sanchez Isabelle¹✉, Blondin Bruno¹, Bigey Frédéric^{1*}

¹ SPO, INRA, Montpellier SupAgro, Univ Montpellier, Montpellier, France

✉Current Address: MISTEA, INRA, Montpellier SupAgro, Univ Montpellier, Montpellier, France

* frederic.bigey@inra.fr

Abstract

Nitrogen composition of the grape must has an impact on yeast growth and fermentation kinetics as well as on the organoleptic properties of the final product. In some technological processes, such as white wine/rosé winemaking, the yeast-assimilable nitrogen content is sometimes insufficient to cover yeast requirements, which can lead to slow or sluggish fermentations. Growth is nevertheless quickly restored upon relief from nutrient starvation, e.g. through the addition of ammonium nitrogen, allowing fermentation completion. The aim of this study was to determine how nitrogen repletion affected the genomic cell response of a *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* wine yeast strain, in particular within the first hour after nitrogen addition. We found almost 4000 genes induced or repressed, sometimes within minutes after nutrient changes. Some of the transcriptional responses to nitrogen depended on the TOR pathway, which controls positively ribosomal protein genes, amino acid and purine biosynthesis or amino acid permease genes and negatively stress-response genes, RTG specific TCA cycle genes and NCR sensitive genes. Some unexpected transcriptional responses concerned all the

glycolytic genes, the starch and glucose metabolism and citrate cycle-related genes that were down-regulated, as well as genes from the lipid metabolism.

Introduction

The yeast cell *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* is able to control its growth in response to changes in nutrient availability. Nitrogen limitation is one of the most frequent limitations observed during wine fermentation [1]. The actual nitrogen content in must is dependent on many factors including rootstock, grape variety, climate, vine growing conditions, and grape processing. In enological conditions, musts are considered as nitrogen-limited when the assimilable nitrogen content is below 150 mg/L [1]. Assimilable nitrogen is important for fermentation kinetics, the maximal fermentative rate being related to the nitrogen level in the must [1]. In most cases of sluggish fermentations, nitrogen depletion quickly results in cells entering a stationary phase. This phenomenon is not related to a decrease in viability, but could rather be related to a catabolic inactivation of the hexose transporters [2] or to lower protein synthesis and cell protein content [3]. Other physiological changes such as autophagy, nitrogen recycling systems and the reorientation of the carbon flux to favour glycogen and trehalose storage have also been observed at the onset of nitrogen starvation [4]. In addition, the transcriptional remodelling associated with the onset of starvation during wine alcoholic fermentations has been described [3], including the development of a general stress response. These transcriptional changes are mostly controlled by the TOR pathway, sensing cell nitrogen status and adapting nitrogen metabolism to nutrient availability [5,6]. Nitrogen limitation stably arrests the cell cycle in G_1/G_0 , whereas medium replenishment with the limiting nutrient quickly restores growth. Relief from nitrogen starvation is a way to increase the fermentation rate, while reducing its duration. In fact assimilable nitrogen addition to nitrogen-deficient must results in a reactivating protein synthesis and increasing sugar transport speed. Although this nitrogen addition is currently practised to reduce the risk of stuck fermentation in white and rosé wines, the molecular mechanisms triggered by nitrogen replenishment are poorly understood.

We report here an investigation of the rapid changes that occur in a wine yeast

strain in response to relief from nitrogen starvation with the aim of elucidating the underlying molecular mechanisms. We performed a transcriptomic study and investigated the changes occurring during the first hour following nitrogen addition. We found that nitrogen repletion very rapidly alters by at least 2-fold the levels of transcripts, a large portion of which are involved with either protein production during growth or decrease in response to stress. Signalling pathways involving PKA and TOR were also affected. The unexpected down-regulation of the glycolysis-related genes and of genes related to the lipid metabolism is discussed.

Materials and methods

Strain and culture conditions

All fermentation experiments were carried out in triplicates using the yeast strain *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* EC1118, a commercial wine yeast from Lallemand SA. The fermentation medium mimicks a standard natural must and has the same composition as the synthetic medium SM300 previously described [1], except for the total concentration of assimilable nitrogen that was 100 mg/L and the addition of 17 g/L $\text{FeCl}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$. Fermentations were conducted under constant stirring at 24°C in 1.2 L flasks equipped with locks to maintain anaerobiosis. Production of CO_2 was monitored by weighing the flasks every 20 min, to determine weight loss. The rate of CO_2 production was estimated using a polynomial smoothing as previously described [7]. The number of cells was determined with a particle counter (Coulter counter, Beckman Coulter). Preliminary experiments had shown that, under this condition, cells were starved for nitrogen (i.e. reached stationary phase) after 42 h when 14 g of CO_2 has been released. Some cells were collected at this stage as controls ($t = 0$), then diammonium phosphate (DAP) was added to the culture medium (300 mg/L final concentration), after removing an equivalent volume of medium to keep the total volume unchanged. Sampling was then performed 15, 30, 45 and 60 min after DAP addition and cells were quickly recovered by filtration as previously described [8].

Labelling and microarray processing

Total RNA extraction, synthesis of labeled cDNA probes, array hybridization and digitalization were performed according to [9]. The microarray data were deposited in the Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) repository under accession number GSE116766. The R v3.03 software was used for normalization and statistical analysis [10]. The raw data was imported and normalization between arrays (quantile method) was performed using the limma package [11]. The normalized data set is available in S1 Table.

Statistical analysis

On the normalized data set, we analyzed gene expression changes over time using a regression based approach to find genes with temporal expression changes (S1 Fig). We defined a binomial regression model for each gene expression over 5 time points:

$Y = b_0 + b_1 t + b_2 t^2 + \epsilon$, where Y is the normalized expression value, t is the time (min),

b_0 is expression at $t = 0$, b_1 is the slope (induction or repression of the gene, linear effect), b_2 is a quadratic effect and ϵ is the residual error term. A variable selection procedure was applied using step regression (backward method) to find significant coefficients for each gene. We adjusted this model by the least-squared technique for each gene and only genes with significant changes over time were selected with an adjusted p-value threshold of 0.01 corrected by the Benjamini-Hochberg method.

Distribution of b_1 and b_2 coefficients is presented on S1 Fig. The sign of b_1 distinguish between up (positive, clusters 1,3,5,7) and down-regulated (negative, clusters 2,4,6,8) gene expression. Furthermore, the sign of b_2 allow us to distinguish between accelerated (positive, clusters 2,5,7) and decelerated (negative, clusters 1,6,8) expression rate. Genes belonging to clusters 3 and 4 ($b_2 = 0$) have linear expression profiles.

Functional analysis was performed looking for Gene Ontology (GO) term enrichment (biological process) using GO Term Finder [12] with the multiple test correction of Benjamini Hochberg.

Results and Discussion

Changes in fermentation kinetics after nitrogen repletion

We investigated the very early events occurring after relief of nitrogen starvation in a wine strain under enological conditions, by samplings every 15 min during the first hour of replenishment. Fig 1 presents a typical fermentation kinetics in a nitrogen-limited synthetic must [1]. First a rapid increase of the CO₂ production rate was observed, reaching a maximum (0.9 g/L/h) at 25 h after inoculation. Thereafter, the rate decreased sharply indicating an arrest of the population growth, the so called stationary phase, where nitrogen was limiting at 14 g of CO₂ released. Then the production rate decreased slowly up to 280 h, indicating that no more sugar was present in the medium. If diammonium phosphate (DAP) was added at the beginning of the stationary phase (42 h), a very quick restart of the rate of CO₂ production which peaked (1.2 g/L/h) higher than the maximum reached at the beginning of the fermentation (0.7 g/L/h). Fermentation ended in 190 h, reducing the fermentation duration by almost 30%. As previously described, the addition of DAP to nitrogen-starved wine yeast cells resulted in a very quick restart of the rate of CO₂ production concomitant with a restart of yeast division [1].

Fig 1. Fermentation profiles CO₂ production rate during fermentation in a nitrogen-depleted synthetic must (black). In another experiment (red), DAP was added at the beginning of the stationary phase (42 h; 14 g CO₂ released)

Numerous changes in gene expression

Significantly regulated genes

We studied the expression of yeast genes within 1 hour following DAP addition at 0, 15, 30, 45 and 60 min (S1 Table). Transcriptome analysis revealed numerous changes during this first hour with almost 4800 nitrogen-regulated genes identified (S2 Table). This is much higher than the 350 genes regulated after 2 hours upon the addition of DAP to active dried yeast inoculated in a Riesling must [13], or than the 1000 [14] or 3000 [8] transcripts altered by the addition of nitrogen to laboratory yeast cells. These differences are probably due to improvements in the DNA microarray technology, to a

reduced time-scale or to the experimental conditions (synthetic versus natural must, 108
industrial versus laboratory yeast strains). Respectively 2292 and 2507 genes were 109
significantly up- or down-regulated (S2 Table), reflecting a massive change in expression 110
patterns upon nitrogen repletion. Analysis of expression (S1 Fig) allowed us to classify 111
genes expression profiles in 8 patterns depending on whether expression was induced 112
(Fig 2) or repressed (Fig 3). 113

Fig 2. Clusters of up-regulated genes Clustering of expression pattern and
GO-term enrichment were performed as described in the Materials and Methods

Fig 3. Clusters of down-regulated genes Clustering of expression pattern and
GO-term enrichment were performed as described in the Materials and Methods

Up-regulated genes 114

Cluster 1 contained 1555 genes exhibiting an initial linear increase ($b_1 > 0$, S1 Fig), 115
sharp but transient, then a decrease of expression due to the negative quadratic term of 116
the equation ($b_2 < 0$). Functional analysis using GO-term enrichment showed that this 117
cluster contained many genes involved in or related to ribosome biogenesis, RNA 118
processing, transcription, translation, nitrogen compound metabolic process, nuclear 119
transport (S3 Table). Cluster 3 contained 381 genes linearly induced within the first 120
hour following repletion ($b_1 > 0$ and $b_2 = 0$), encoding proteins involved in the 121
regulation of gene expression and of metabolic and biosynthetic processes. Cluster 5, 122
which contained 292 genes that exhibited an expression accelerating with time ($b_1 = 0$ 123
and $b_2 > 0$), was enriched in genes involved in cellular amino-acid (*TRP2*, *MET8*, *HIS3*, 124
LEU4, *TRP3*, *LYS2*, *HIS5*, *ARG4*, *HIS4*, *ARG7*, *ARG1*) and organic acids biosynthetic 125
processes. Cluster 7 contained 64 genes that exhibited the highest increase in expression 126
among all up-regulated genes, following a linear profile ($b_1 > 0$) with a slight 127
acceleration ($b_2 > 0$). Functional analysis showed that this cluster was similar to cluster 128
5. 129

This global response is similar to what was described for the commercial wine yeast 130
strain VIN13, 2 hours after DAP addition [13], where an up-regulation was observed for 131
genes involved in amino acid metabolism, de novo purine biosynthesis, and protein 132
synthesis. Such changes likely corresponded to an activation of the Target of Rapamycin 133

(TOR) signaling pathway which positively controls ribosomal protein genes [15], amino acid and purine biosynthesis or amino acid permease genes [16]. Surprisingly, within 60 min we didn't find any change in the expression of genes related to sulfate assimilation, although this had been observed (after two hours) by [13].

Three components of the MCM (mini-chromosome maintenance) hexameric complex helicase, binding to chromatin as a part of the pre-replicative complex (*MCM2*, *MCM3*, and *MCM6*), and also *MAD1* and *YCG1*, were transiently but sharply induced after relief from nitrogen starvation. The MCM complex is required for the initiation of eukaryotic replication, while *MAD1* is a coiled-coil protein involved in the spindle-assembly checkpoint. Its phosphorylation leads to an inhibition of the activity of the anaphase promoting complex. *YCG1* is required for establishment and maintenance of chromosome condensation, chromosome segregation and chromatin binding of the condensin complex and is also required for clustering tRNA genes at the nucleolus. In addition, other cell-cycle related genes were induced, such as *RAD59*, *CDC20*, *RFA3*, *MSH2* and *YHM2*. Thus, all these transient inductions are coherent with a restart of the cell cycle in response to nitrogen replenishment.

Down-regulated genes

Among the clusters corresponding to down-regulated genes (Fig 3), 2235 genes in cluster 2 exhibited an initial linear decrease ($b_1 < 0$), sharp but transient, then an increase of expression due to the positive quadratic term of the equation ($b_2 > 0$). Functional analysis showed that cluster 2 contained many genes involved in protein catabolic process, proteolysis, organonitrogen compound catabolic process, lipid metabolic process, response to stress, oxydo-reduction process, ATP synthesis, nucleotide metabolic process and aerobic respiration. Cluster 4 contained 168 genes that were linearly repressed during the first hour following repletion ($b_1 < 0$ and $b_2 = 0$). No significant enrichment in GO-terms was observed for this cluster. Cluster 6 contained 99 genes that exhibited a decelerating expression with time ($b_1 = 0$ and $b_2 < 0$) and was enriched in genes involved in nucleoside and ribonucleoside metabolic process, glycolytic process and ATP biosynthetic process. Finally, cluster 8 contained only 5 genes that exhibited an amplitude of down-regulation similar to the previous clusters. This is a linear profile ($b_1 < 0$) with a slightly deceleration ($b_2 < 0$). Functional analysis showed

no significant enrichment. 165

In our conditions (i.e. within one hour after repletion), we found other functions for 166
down-regulated genes than those described previously [13]. In fact, genes related to 167
cellular transport and transport mechanism were repressed in response to DAP addition 168
(*NCE102*, *POR1*, *PMA2*, *ATP19*, *ATP2*, *UGA4*, *PUT4*, *GSP2*, *YPT53*). Other most 169
interesting genes were those related to stress response, to NCR , to glycolysis or related 170
lipid biosynthetic processes (among which ergosterol). Among genes in this last group, 171
we found *ETR1*, *IFA38*, *ERG28*, *ERG4*, *ERG25*, *ERG11*, *NCP1*, *ERG20*, *ELO1*, *FAS1*, 172
ERG3, *ERG6*, *ERG5*, *LIP1*, *ERG24*, *ACC1*, *POT1*, *TIP1*, *OPI3*, *YML131W*, *AAD10*, 173
GCY1, *GRE3*, *TGL4* and, more specifically those related to ergosterol biosynthesis 174
(*ERG28*, *ERG4*, *ERG25*, *ERG11*, *NCP1*, *ERG20*, *MCR1*, *ERG3*, *ERG6*, *ERG5*, *ERG24*, 175
ERG10). 176

Moreover, DAP addition to a nitrogen starved yeast culture decreased the expression 177
of a large group of stress-related genes, such as heat-shock protein related genes, but 178
also PAU-related genes, which mostly belong to cluster 2. This pattern indicated that 179
the down-regulation of these genes was a rapid phenomena, largely decreasing within 180
the first 15 min after nitrogen repletion. Other genes related to stress gene regulation 181
such as *HSF1*, *MSN2*, and *MSN4* [17] were also down-regulated in our study as well as 182
genes involved in trehalose and glycogen metabolisms (*TPS1*, *TPS2*, *TPS3*, *ATH1*, 183
NTH1, *NTH2*, *TSL1*, *GPH1*, *GPD1*, *GSY1*, *GSY2*). 184

Such changes are also likely related to an activation of the TOR signaling pathway 185
that negatively controls stress response genes, the retrograde response (RTG) specific to 186
the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle genes and nitrogen catabolite repression (NCR) 187
sensitive genes [16]. 188

Interestingly, the down-regulation of genes related to glycolysis, which has been 189
previously reported in similar experimental conditions but on a laboratory strain [8], 190
was confirmed here in an enological strain (S2 Fig). This indicates the conservation of 191
this mechanism independently of strain specificity. As previously suggested, these 192
unexpected results were probably revealed by analyzing the very early events following 193
nitrogen replenishment. This repression of glycolytic genes in wine yeast had already 194
been observed, but in rather different experimental conditions such as after rehydration 195
of active dried yeasts and inoculation of a fermentation medium [18]. This repression 196

could be linked to a decrease in energy demand as suggested by these authors. 197

Other important changes were also revealed in the present study, concerning for 198
instance the down-regulation of genes related to the MAPK signaling pathways, 199
oxidoreductase activity, or NCR metabolism. Concerning genes related to stress and to 200
NCR, their down-regulation corresponded to a common response to glucose, nitrogen 201
and phosphorous depletion, whereas the down-regulation of nitrogenous compound 202
catabolism and amino acid derivative transport were nitrogen-specific [14]. For these 203
authors, both PKA and TOR signaling pathways might be involved in the responses to 204
all three nutrients viz. glucose, nitrogen and phosphate. Surprisingly, these authors 205
found that genes associated with glycolysis and gluconeogenesis were specifically 206
repressed by phosphorous, whereas in the present study they were both nitrogen- and 207
phosphate-regulated (as we used ammonium phosphate). 208

It was in fact surprising to observe the repression of all the glycolysis-related genes 209
whereas genes related to ribosomal protein synthesis were up-regulated. This could 210
indicate that the restart of the fermentative activity shortly after the addition of DAP 211
was unrelated to the glycolytic pathway but rather to the cell cycle and protein 212
synthesis activation. In fact, Rim15p, which gene expression is down-regulated in our 213
study, has been found to integrate signals derived from PKA, TORC1 and Sch9p, which 214
transmit the information concerning the availability of nutrients [19]. Rim15p regulates 215
proper entry into G_0 via the transcription factors Msn2/4p and Gis1p whose related 216
genes were also down-regulated. The down-regulation of *RIM15* is thus coherent with 217
the up-regulation of cell-cycle related genes and correspond to the model previously 218
suggested [8]. 219

Conclusion 220

The addition of nitrogen to starved wine yeast cells thus contributed to the development 221
of a favorable environment for wine yeast growth and also to limit the general stress 222
response. Most of these responses are quite the converse of changes observed in 223
nitrogen-starved yeast, when cells reach the stationary phase stage [4]. 224

Supporting information

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S1 Fig. Clustering method. Schematic representation of the method used for the manual clustering of expression profiles. (PDF)

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S2 Fig. Expression profiles of glycolytic genes. Expression profile of 16 glycolytic genes. (PDF)

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S1 Table. Gene expression over time. Table of 6000 genes expression after normalization. (TSV)

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S2 Table. Clusters' composition. Spreadsheet containing the name and function of each genes belonging to each cluster. (XLSX)

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S3 Table. Functional analysis. Spreadsheet containing the GO-term enrichment for each cluster. (XLSX)

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Author contributions

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B.B., C.T. and F.B. jointly conceived the study, interpreted the data and wrote the paper. C.B. and M.P. performed experiments. I.S. and F.B. conducted statistical analyses of microarray data.

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Data availability

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Dataset, R scripts, figures and tables are available in open-access on Zenodo ([doi:10.5281/zenodo.1295508](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1295508))

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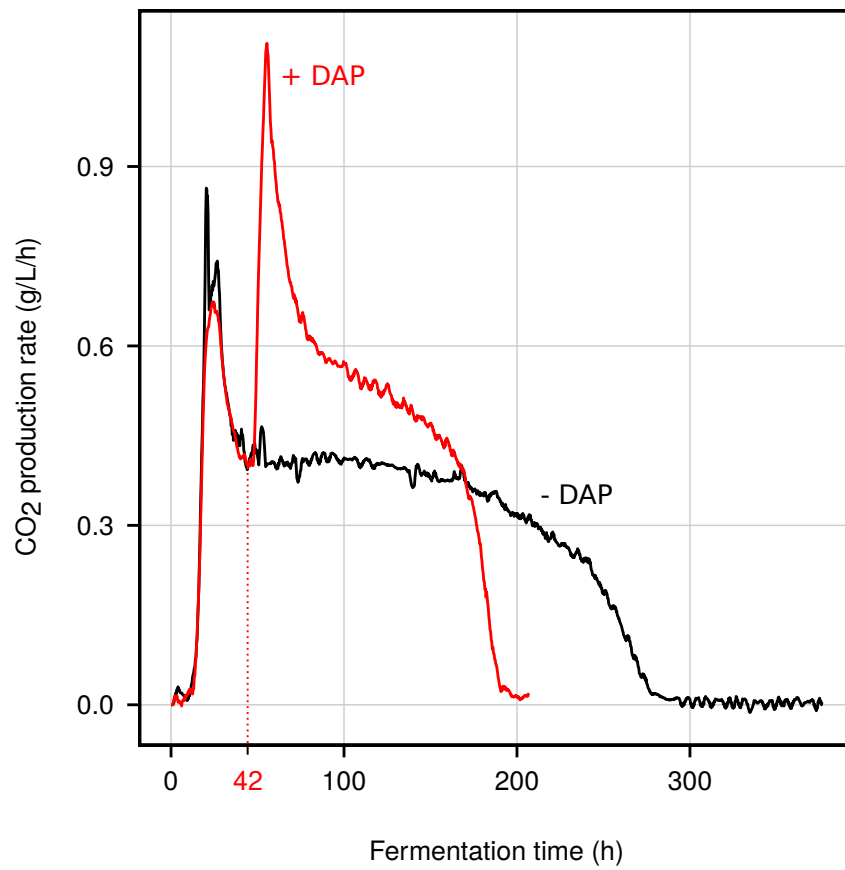


Figure 1

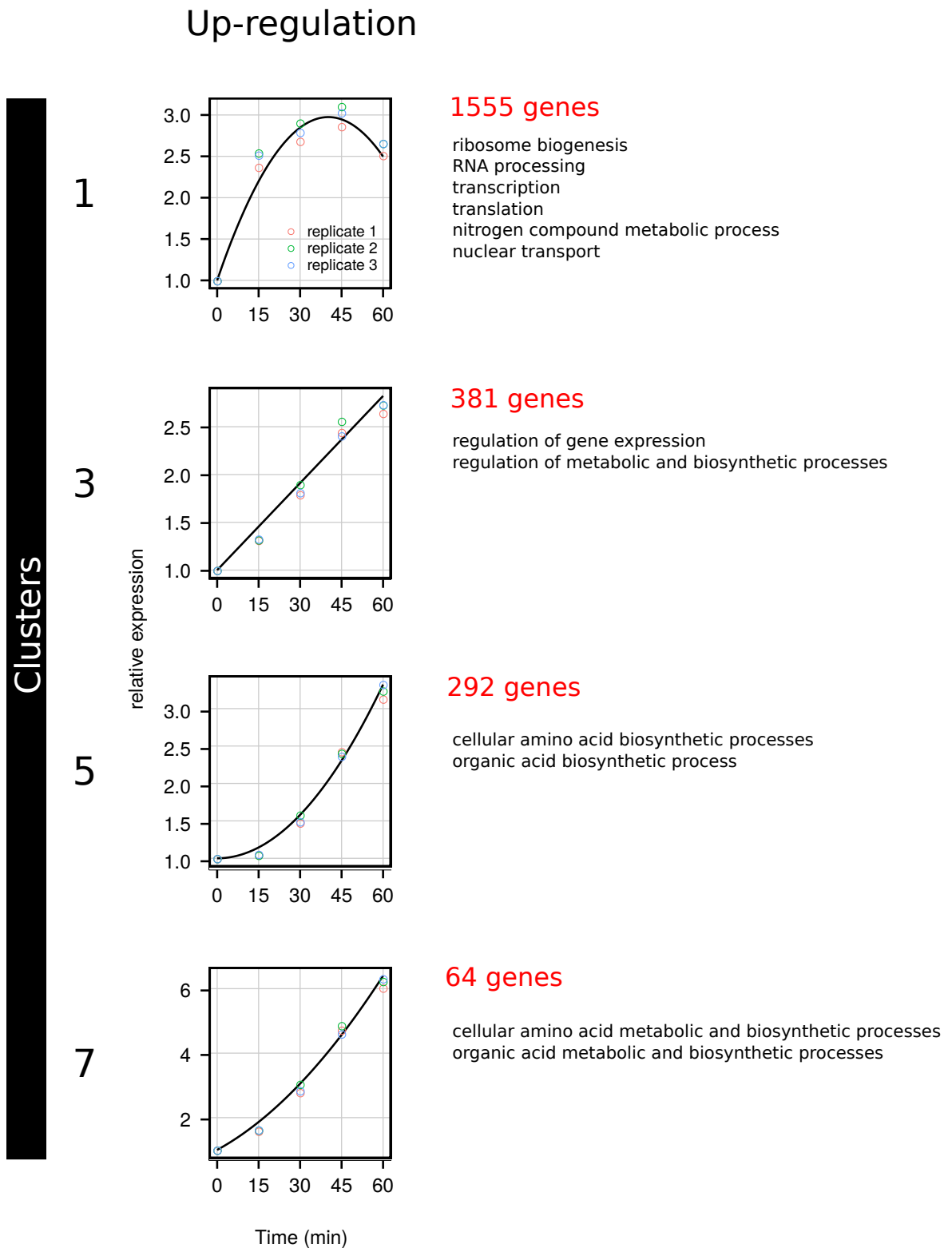


Figure 2

Down-regulation

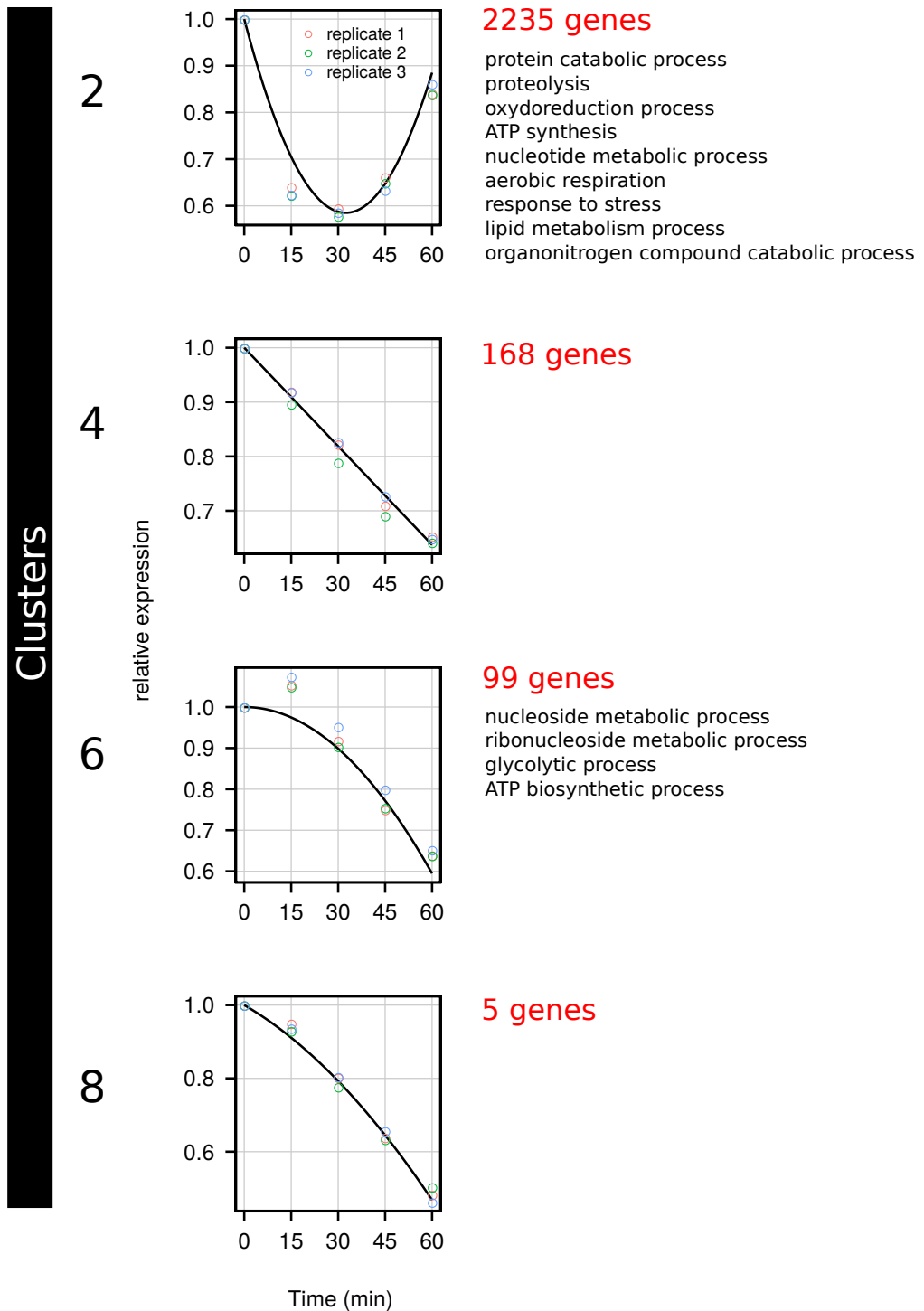


Figure 3