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Re-cultivation of Neochloris oleoabundans in exhausted autotrophic and mixotrophic media: the potential role of polyamines and free fatty acids

--Manuscript Draft--

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Corresponding Author:	Simonetta Pancaldi Italy
Corresponding Author Secondary Information:	
Corresponding Author's Institution:	
Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:	
First Author:	Alessandra Sabia
First Author Secondary Information:	
Order of Authors:	Alessandra Sabia
	Costanza Baldisserotto
	Stefania Biondi
	Roberta Marchesini
	Paola Tedeschi
	Annalisa Maietti
	Martina Giovanardi
	Lorenzo Ferroni
	Simonetta Pancaldi
Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
Funding Information:	
Abstract:	Neochloris oleoabundans (Chlorophyta) is widely considered one of the most promising microalgae for biotechnological applications. However, the large-scale production of microalgae requires large amounts of water. In this perspective, the possibility of using exhausted growth media for the re-cultivation of N. oleoabundans was investigated in order to simultaneously make the cultivation more economically feasible and environmentally sustainable. Experiments were performed by testing the following media: autotrophic exhausted medium (E+) and mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose (EG+) of N. oleoabundans cells grown in a 20-L photobioreactor (PBR). Both exhausted media were replenished with the same amounts of nitrate and phosphate as the control brackish medium (C). Growth kinetics, nitrate and phosphate consumption, photosynthetic pigments content, photosynthetic efficiency, cell morphology, and lipid production were evaluated. Moreover, the free fatty acid (FFA) composition of exhausted media and the polyamine (PA) concentrations of both algae and media were analyzed in order to test if some molecules, released into the medium, could influence algal growth and metabolism. Results showed that N. oleoabundans can efficiently grow in both exhausted media, if appropriately replenished with the main nutrients (E+ and EG+), especially in E+ and to the same extent as in C medium. Growth promotion of N. oleoabundans was attributed

	to PAs and alteration of the photosynthetic apparatus to FFAs. Taken together, results show that recycling growth medium is a suitable solution to obtain good N. oleoabundans biomass concentrations, while providing a more sustainable ecological impact on water resources.
Response to Reviewers:	see attached file

Dear Editor,

we are very grateful that our MS was positively evaluated by the Reviewers.

We have modified the MS according with indications of Reviewers 1 and 2. Changes made in the MS were highlighted by using the track changes mode in MS Word.

Hoping that our revised MS can be now eligible for publication in Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology, I convey you my very best regards.

Simonetta Pancaldi

Associate Professor

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI FERRARA
DIPARTIMENTO di SCIENZE della **VITA e BIOTECNOLOGIE**
Corso Ercole I d'Este, 32 - 44121 Ferrara (Italia)

Ferrara, March 26th, 2015

Dear Prof. Steinbüchel,

please find our manuscript entitled "Re-cultivation of *Neochloris oleoabundans* in exhausted autotrophic and mixotrophic media: the potential role of polyamines and free fatty acids" by Alessandra Sabia, Costanza Baldisserotto, Stefania Biondi, Roberta Marchesini, Paola Tedeschi, Annalisa Maietti, Martina Giovanardi, Lorenzo Ferroni, Simonetta Pancaldi, which we are submitting for publication in *Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology*.

- We declare that the paper has not been published previously, is not accepted for publication, has not been submitted previously to *Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology* and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.
- All Authors approve the submission of the paper to *Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology* and no-one entitled to authorship has been excluded.
- The work does not violate the laws of the country (Italy) in which it was carried out, including those relating to conservation and animal welfare.
- The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.
- Colour figures are intended only for the online version.

Hoping that our work is eligible for publication in your Journal, I convey you our very best regards.

Simonetta Pancaldi

University of Ferrara
Laboratory of Plant Cytophysiology
Department of Life Sciences and Biotechnologies
Corso Ercole I D'Este, 32
44121 Ferrara – Italy
e-mail: pcs@unife.it; Phone: 0039 0532 293786; Fax: 0039 0532 208561

List of changes and answers to Reviewers' comments

Reviewer #1:

General question:

About the correlation between the amount and composition of intracellular fatty acid composition inside *Neochloris oleoabundans* cells and in exhausted media, we performed several in-depth analyses on lipid profile of autotrophic and mixotrophic cells. The results are very interesting and are the topic of an extensive study we have just submitted to an International journal for publication. We cannot reiterate these data in the revised MS, however we can confirm to the Reviewer that the FFA profile in the medium is consistent with that in cells.

Other comments:

1) Glucose concentration of EG media was determined by 1,5-dinitrosalicylic acid assay during the growth of *Neochloris oleoabundans* inside the PBR. At the end of the experiment, i.e. at the 8th day of growth, when the exhausted medium was harvested for our experiments, glucose was shown totally consumed. This aspect has been better specified in "Material and Methods" section, at page 6, line 19ff.
   About pH changes during the experiments, measurements were periodically performed in C, E^{+} and EG^{+} samples, but we did not introduce them in the previous MS. Results showed that pH of exhausted media remained almost stable, fluctuating around 9.5 and 8 during the whole experiment, without any evident trend. For this reason we think that growth promotion and metabolic changes observed in microalgae grown in E^{+} and EG^{+} media cannot be attributed to pH fluctuations. In the Revised MS we included this experiment (page 6 line 21ff, page 7, line 23, page 13 line 22 ff, page 18 line 1 ff, Figure S1 in "Supplemental Materials").

2) OK. "Data treatment" has been changed to "Data analysis".

3) In BM medium, the concentration of phosphate is 100 times lower than nitrate (0.2 gL^{-1} *vs* 0.002 gL^{-1} respectively). It is probably for this reason that in this work phosphate was consumed faster than nitrate. This aspect, as requested, has been explained in the "Discussion" section (page 18 line 8ff). However, it is also reported in previous works that FFAs induce an alteration in membrane permeability of microalgal cells, with the consequent rapid consumption of phosphate. This aspect was already discussed in the MS (page 20 line 2ff).

4) We thank the Reviewer for his/her positive comments on TEM images.

5) OK, as requested, the two section "extracellular FFA composition" and "polyamine content" have been moved before the "growth kinetics" section.

6) Figures 2 and 4 have been changed to higher resolutions (1200 dpi).

Reviewer #2:

1) About the number of repetition, we performed three replicates for each treatment (C, E^+ and EG^+ media, page 7, line 8). Moreover, both exhausted media derived from replicates of different cycles in PBR, stocked at -20°C before the experiments.

2) EG^+ medium was not replenished with glucose, but only with nitrate and phosphate at the initial concentration of BM medium. For this reason, in this work we did not include a control in which fresh BM medium was supplied with glucose, but only a control composed by fresh BM medium, that was used as reference for both E^+ and EG^+ samples.

3) Regarding the micronutrient concentrations, their consumption and the linkage with the photosynthetic efficiency, according with the Reviewer we also think that a lack of these trace elements may contribute to the decrease of F_V/F_M in both E^+ and EG^+ samples. However, because of their low concentration even at time 0 in fresh BM medium, we were not able to measure the consumption of these minerals by microalgae during the experiments. The quantification of trace elements has been reported also in previous works to be very difficult because of the low concentrations in the microalgal media (Hadj-Romdhane et al., 2012. Bioresource Technol 123:366-374). Moreover, considering that we did not replenish the exhausted media with trace elements, it is probable that micronutrients were lacking in E^+ and EG^+ since the beginning of the experiments. For this reason, we believe that the gradual decrease in photosynthetic efficiency in cells grown in both exhausted media can be more probably attributed to the presence of inhibiting molecules rather than to the consumption of trace elements.

4) We thank the Reviewer for his/her suggestion to implement research with samples grown in fresh BM medium added with FFAs and PAs. We also agree that it would be very interesting to perform these analyses to provide a mechanistic physiological background to the potential role of these metabolites on algae metabolism. However, the main scope of this MS was to test recycle of media in an applied perspective, according to this Journal's scope. As correctly pointed out by the Reviewer, the research will be extended in the future with basic analyses to improve the understanding of algae physiology. Clearly, the experimental efforts to reach this goal go well beyond the aim of the current MS and will be the subject of a new paper.

Minor remarks: Sentence in the Abstract has been changed as requested, specifying that exhausted media which allowed to obtain good biomass concentration of *N. oleoabundans* were replenished with the main nutrients (page 2, line 7ff).

Re-cultivation of *Neochloris oleoabundans* in exhausted autotrophic and mixotrophic media: the potential role of polyamines and free fatty acids

Alessandra Sabia[1], Costanza Baldisserotto[1], Stefania Biondi[2], Roberta Marchesini[1], Paola Tedeschi[3], Annalisa Maietti[3], Martina Giovanardi[1], Lorenzo Ferroni[1], Simonetta Pancaldi[1]

[1]Department of Life Sciences and Biotechnology, University of Ferrara, Corso Ercole I d'Este 32, 44121 Ferrara, Italy.

[2]Department of Biological, Geological and Environmental Sciences, University of Bologna, via Irnerio 42, 40126 Bologna, Italy.

[3]Department of Chemical and Pharmaceutical Science, University of Ferrara, via Fossato di Mortara 17, 44121 Ferrara, Italy.

*Corresponding Author. Tel: +39 0532 293786; Fax: +39 0532 208561; E-mail address: simonetta.pancaldi@unife.it.

ABSTRACT

Neochloris oleoabundans (*Chlorophyta*) is widely considered one of the most promising microalgae for biotechnological applications. However, the large-scale production of microalgae requires large amounts of water. In this perspective, the possibility of using exhausted growth media for the re-cultivation of *N. oleoabundans* was investigated in order to simultaneously make the cultivation more economically feasible and environmentally sustainable. Experiments were performed by testing the following media: autotrophic exhausted medium (E+) and mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose (EG+) of *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in a 20-L

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photobioreactor (PBR). Both exhausted media were replenished with the same amounts of nitrate and phosphate as the control brackish medium (C). Growth kinetics, nitrate and phosphate consumption, photosynthetic pigments content, photosynthetic efficiency, cell morphology, and lipid production were evaluated. Moreover, the free fatty acid (FFA) composition of exhausted media and the polyamine (PA) concentrations of both algae and media were analyzed in order to test if some molecules, released into the medium, could influence algal growth and metabolism. Results showed that *N. oleoabundans* can efficiently grow in both exhausted media, if appropriately replenished with the main nutrients (E+ and EG+), especially in E+, and to the same extent as in C medium. Growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* was attributed to PAs and alteration of the photosynthetic apparatus to FFAs. Taken together, results show that recycling growth medium is a suitable solution to obtain good *N. oleoabundans* biomass concentrations, while providing a more sustainable ecological impact on water resources.

Keywords:

Neochloris oleoabundans

Recycling culture media

Photosynthetic apparatus

Biomass production

Polyamines

Free fatty acids

Introduction

Over the last decades, microalgae have received much attention as promising high-potential feedstock for biodiesel (Chisti 2007; Li et al. 2008; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013) and as an attractive raw material for the production of a wide range of high value bioproducts (Molina Grima et al. 2003; Mata et al. 2010). They are photosynthetic microorganisms with numerous key features, which potentially make them a more appreciable renewable source than terrestrial plants (Richmond 2004; Hu et al 2008; Ndimba et al. 2013). For instance, these microorganisms have faster growth rates, higher photosynthetic efficiencies, higher rates of carbon dioxide fixation, and higher biomass productivities compared to plants (Richmond 2004; Gouveia et al. 2009; Harun et al. 2010; Mata et al. 2010). Moreover, microalgae can thrive in non-arable lands being able to grow in waters having different salinity levels and chemical composition (Smith et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013).

The environmental and economical impact of large-scale production of microalgae has been widely discussed, with the aim of making the process increasingly sustainable (Sheehan 2009; Solomon 2010). In this perspective, microalgal cultivation systems are crucial factors to be taken into account (Smith et al. 2010; Stephens et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013). A wide variety of systems has been described by Mata and co-workers (2010) and recently by Borowitzka and Moheimani (2013). Microalgae can be cultivated in open pond reactors or closed photobioreactors (PBRs), depending on algal strain, issue of research, type of desired products and environmental conditions (Chisti 2007; Mata et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013). Although open ponds are the most commonly used culture systems, due to their low cost of production and operation, recently closed PBRs are receiving much attention for the possibility of producing valuable compounds (Pulz 2001; Grobbelaar 2009; Smith et al. 2010). However, algal cultures require large amounts of water in both culture systems (Lam and Lee 2012; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013).

Considering that water is becoming a scarce natural resource, water demand represents an important factor when performing large-scale cultivation (Batan et al. 2013; Farooq et al. 2014). In order to reduce the high production costs and, at the same time, to make microalgal production more environmentally sustainable, recycling culture medium has been proposed as a possible solution (Yang et al. 2011; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2012; Farooq et al. 2014), especially in large-scale culture systems (Borowitzka 2005; Lam and Lee 2012; Zhu et al. 2013). However, the feasibility of recycling growth medium to re-cultivate microalgae has been tested only in a few cases (Lívanský et al. 1996; Rodolfi et al. 2003; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2013; Zhu et al. 2013). It is reported that the recycling medium could have negative effects on biomass productivity, due to the release of inhibitory secondary metabolites (Richmond 2004). Harmful metabolites are, in fact, released during microalgal growth under physiological stress (Ikawa 2004; Moheimani and Borowitzka 2006). Free fatty acids (FFAs), and substances derived from the photooxidation of unsaturated fatty acids, are the most common metabolites with inhibitory effects on microalgae (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006; Bosma et al. 2008; Stephen et al. 2010).

In the present work, the suitability of recycling growth media for the re-cultivation of *Neochloris oleoabundans* (*Chlorophyta*) was investigated. This species was chosen because it is considered one of the most promising oil-rich microalgae, due to its capability to accumulate lipids when grown under nitrogen starvation (Tornabene et al. 1983; Chisti 2007; Li et al. 2008; Pruvost et al. 2009) or mixotrophically, in the presence of glucose, or carbon-rich wastes, as organic carbon sources (Giovanardi et al. 2013; Baldisserotto et al. 2014). Present results clearly indicate that *N. oleoabundans* can efficiently grow in its exhausted growth medium, if suitably replenished with the main nutrients. Based on this encouraging result, and with the aim of gaining further knowledge on the morpho-physiological aspects and biotechnological applications of this algal strain, the following features were analyzed: (1) growth kinetics in parallel to nitrate and phosphate consumption; (2) photosynthetic pigment content; (3) PSII maximum quantum yield; (4) cell morphology, with special attention to intracellular lipid accumulation, (5) FFA accumulation in

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recycled growth media, and (6) polyamine (PA) concentration both inside cells and in the corresponding culture media. PAs were determined in order to understand if these plant growth regulators could be responsible for the growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* in recycled growth medium. It is known, in fact, that PAs, together with other plant growth regulators, have stimulatory effects on algal growth and metabolism, and are involved in mitigating various types of biotic and abiotic stress (Tate et al. 2013).

Materials and Methods

Algal strains and culture condition

The strain used in this study was the *Chlorophyta N. oleoabundans* UTEX 1185 (syn. *Ettlia oleoabundans*) (*Sphaeropleales, Neochloridaceae*), obtained from the Culture Collection of Algae of the University of Texas (UTEX, Austin, Texas, USA; www.utex.org).

N. oleoabundans was cultivated in axenic liquid brackish medium (BM) (Baldisserotto et al. 2012) in a coaxial 20-L capacity PBR (M2M Engineering, Grazzanise, Caserta, Italy). Algae were cultivated autotrophically in BM for 25 days or mixotrophically, by addition of 2.5 g L^{-1} glucose, for 8 days, according to previously described protocols (Baldisserotto et al. 2014; Giovanardi et al. 2014). For autotrophic cultivation, cells were inoculated into the PBR to obtain an initial cell density of about 0.6 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}, while for mixotrophic cultivation initial cell density was higher (10 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}). Culture conditions in the PBR were: 24 ± 1°C; sterile air injection at the bottom of the PBR, with 0.5/3.5 h bubbling/static cycles; irradiance 65 $\mu mol_{photons}$ m^{-2} s^{-1} of PAR (16:8 h light:dark photoperiod). Light was supplied with inner cool–white fluorescent Philips tubes.

Algal growth and morphology in the PBR were monitored as described below.

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Preparation of growth media

Experiments were performed by testing the following media:

- C: freshly prepared BM medium (control);

- E: autotrophic exhausted medium;

- EG: mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose;

- E+: autotrophic exhausted medium replenished with nitrate and phosphate concentrations as for BM medium;

- EG+: mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose and replenished with nutrients as in E+.

In order to obtain the exhausted media for the recycling experiment, *N. oleoabundans* was grown inside the PBR under the culture conditions described in the previous section. For E+ medium preparation, about 500 mL of autotrophic algal culture in the stationary phase of growth (at the 15th day of cultivation in the PBR) were centrifuged at 2,000 *g* for 10 min in order to separate the medium from the algae, thus obtaining an autotrophic exhausted medium (E). The medium appeared pale-yellow and was free from algae, bacteria and protozoa; its optical density at a wavelength of 750 nm (OD_{750}) was 0.02. For EG+ medium, at the 8th day of cultivation in the PBR, the same aliquots of algal culture were harvested by centrifugation (2,000 *g* for 10 min). In this case, the mixotrophic exhausted medium (EG) was straw-yellow in colour and presented a weak bacterial contamination due to the glucose addition (OD_{750} =0.009). Glucose was proved to be totally consumed during the previous cultivation inside the PBR by 3,5-dinitrosalicylic (DNS; Sigma-Aldrich, Gallarate, Milan, Italy) acid assay, according to Giovanardi et al. (2014). In both exhausted media, pH was not adjusted. After determining the nitrate and phosphate concentrations of the two exhausted media (see "Nitrate and phosphate analyses"), KNO_3 and K_2HPO_4 were axenically added to reach final concentrations of 0.2 and 0.02 g L^{-1}, respectively, i.e., the typical concentration of those components in BM, thus obtaining the replenished exhausted media (E+ and

EG+) used for experiments.

Experimental design

When autotrophic cultures of *N. oleoabundans*, grown in BM in the PBR, reached a cell density of 10 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1} (after about 9 days of cultivation), aliquots of cells were inoculated into 300-mL Erlenmeyer flasks (150 mL total volume) containing C, E+, EG+ media, to obtain an initial cell density of about 0.5 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}. The cultures were placed in a growth chamber (24 ± 1 °C, 80 $\mu mol_{photons}$ m^{-2} s^{-1} of PAR with a 16:8 h light-darkness photoperiod), and cultivated with continuous shaking at 80 rpm, without external CO_2 supply. Experiments were performed in triplicate. Aliquots of cultures (cells and media) were collected at different times of cultivation up to 25 days, depending on the analysis.

Analyses

Growth evaluation

Aliquots of cell samples cultivated in control and exhausted media were counted at 0, 3, 7, 12, 17 and 25 days of cultivation using a Thoma haemocytometer (HBG, Giessen, Germany) under a light microscope (Zeiss, model Axiophot) and growth curves were obtained.

The growth rate (μ, number of divisions per day) during the exponential phase was calculated with the following equation:

μ (div d^{-1}) = ($\log_2 N_1 - \log_2 N_0$) / ($t_1 - t_0$),

where μ is the growth rate, N_1 the cell number at time t_1, N_0 the cell number at time 0 and $t_1 - t_0$ the time interval (days) (Giovanardi et al. 2013).

In parallel to growth, pH was also periodically monitored on small aliquots of samples.

Nitrate and phosphate analyses

After 12 and 25 days of cultivation, samples of C, E+ and EG+ media were harvested by centrifugation to analyze nitrate and phosphate concentrations. These nutrients were quantified colorimetrically using a flow-injection autoanalyzer (FlowSys, Systea, Roma, Italy).

Photosynthetic pigment extraction and quantification

For photosynthetic pigment analysis, cell samples were collected by centrifugation after 0, 7, 17, 21 and 25 days of cultivation. Extraction of photosynthetic pigments was performed according to Baldisserotto et al. (2014). The extracts were measured with a Pharmacia Ultrospec 2000 UV-Vis spectrophotometer (1-nm bandwidth; Amersham Biosciences, Piscataway, NJ, USA) at 666 (chlorophyll *a* - Chl*a*), 653 (chlorophyll *b* - Chl*b*) and 470 nm (carotenoids - Car). Quantification was performed according to equations reported in Wellburn (1994).

PAM fluorimetry

The PSII maximum quantum yield of algae was determined at the same cultivation times considered for growth kinetics measurements. A pulse amplitude modulated fluorometer (ADC Bioscientific Ltd, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, UK) was used to determine the *in vivo* chlorophyll fluorescence of PSII. The PSII maximum quantum yield is reported as F_V/F_M ratio, *i.e.* $(F_M - F_0)/F_M$, where variable fluorescence is $F_V = (F_M - F_0)$, F_M is the maximum fluorescence and F_0 is the initial fluorescence of samples (Lichtenthaler et al. 2005). This measurement is considered a valid method to probe the maximum quantum yield of photochemistry in PSII (Kalaji et al. 2014). Moreover, it is useful to estimate the physiological state of plants and microorganisms also under nutrient stress (White et al. 2011). Samples were prepared as reported in Ferroni et al. (2011) after 15 min of dark incubation.

Light and fluorescence microscopy

For microscopic observations, cell samples were routinely collected throughout the cultivation period inside the PBR and during the experiment with exhausted media. Aliquots of samples were observed using a microscope (Zeiss, model Axiophot) with conventional and fluorescent attachments. The light source for chlorophyll fluorescence observation was a HBO 100 W pressure mercury vapour lamp (filter set, BP436/10, LP470). Pictures of cells were taken with a Canon IXUS 110 IS digital camera (12.1 megapixels), mounted on the ocular lens through a Leica DC150 system (Leica Camera AG, Solms, Germany).

Lipid staining

During experiments, the intracellular presence of lipids was evaluated by staining cells with the fluorochrome Nile Red (9-diethylamina-5Hbenzo[α]phenoxazine-5-one, 0.5 mg dissolved in 100 mL acetone; Sigma-Aldrich, Gallarate, Milan, Italy), as described in Giovanardi et al. (2014). After incubation at 37°C in darkness for 15 min, cells were observed with the microscope described above at an excitation wavelength of 485 nm (filter set, BP485, LP520). Photographs were taken with the camera described above.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM)

TEM observations were made on cells harvested by centrifugation (600 *g*, 10 min) at the 12th day of cultivation. Cells were fixed, post-fixed and dehydrated as reported in Baldisserotto et al. (2012). Embedding in resin and staining procedures were performed as previously described (Pancaldi et al. 2002). Sections were observed with a Hitachi H800 electron microscope (Hitachi, Tokyo, Japan) at the Electron Microscopy Centre, University of Ferrara.

Extracellular free fatty acids analysis

To analyze the FFA composition of the exhausted E and EG media used to prepare E+ and EG+ replenished media, aliquots of *N. oleoabundans* cultures grown autotrophically and mixotrophically in the PBR were collected at the 15th and at the 8th day of cultivation, respectively. Samples were centrifuged at 2,000 *g* for 10 min in order to separate the medium from algae. Fifty mL of media obtained from the autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) cultures were freeze-dried for analysis. The extracellular FFA composition was determined in duplicate by gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS). For extraction, samples were dissolved in 3 mL of hexane, sonicated for 15 min and extracted overnight. Fatty acid methyl esters were prepared by transesterification with 1.5 mL of 5% of sodium hydroxide in methanol solution. Sample volumes of 1 µl were injected into the GC-MS apparatus, which consisted of a Varian Saturn 2100 MS/MS ion trap mass spectrometer. Separations were performed using a Zebron ZB-WAX Phenomenex capillary column (60 cm in length, 0.25 mm i.d) supplied with helium carrier gas at 1 mL min^{-1} constant flow. The injector temperature was 250 °C and the oven temperature program~~me~~ was the following: start 100°C for 2 min, ramp to 200°C at 10 °C/min, and hold for 108 min. The MS acquisitions were performed by full scan mode.

Determination of polyamines

To analyze the free PA composition of *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in PBR and in the corresponding E and EG media, samples were collected as described for FFA analyses. Freeze-dried E or EG media and algae (50 and 20 mg, respectively) were extracted in cold 4% perchloric acid, kept for 1 h on ice, and then centrifuged at 15,000 *g* for 15 min. Aliquots (200 µL) of the supernatants and standard solutions of putrescine (Put), spermidine (Spd) and spermine (Spm) were derivatised with dansyl chloride (Scaramagli et al.

1999). Dansylated derivatives were extracted with toluene, taken to dryness and resuspended in acetonitrile. PAs were separated and quantified by HPLC using a reverse phase C_{18} column (Spherisorb ODS2, 5-µm particle diameter, 4.6 x 250 mm, Waters, Wexford, Ireland) and a programmed acetonitrile:water step gradient (flow rate 1 mL min^{-1}) on a Jasco system (Jasco Corp., Tokyo, Japan) consisting of a PU-1580 pump, an LG-1580-02 ternary gradient unit, a DG-1580-53 three-line degasser and a FP-1529 fluorescence detector, linked to an autosampler (AS 2055 Plus).

Data ~~treatment~~ analysis

Data were processed with Graphpad Prism 6 (Graph Pad Software, San Diego CA, USA). In each case, means ± standard deviations for *n* number of samples are given. Statistical analyses for comparison of means were carried out using ANOVA, followed by Student's *t*-test (significance level, 0.05).

Results

Growth and morphology of N. oleoabundans *cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in a 20-L PBR*

Growth kinetics and cell morphology of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in a 20-L PBR are shown in Fig 1. Autotrophic cells rapidly entered the exponential phase starting on the 2^{nd}-3^{rd} day up to the 7^{th}-9^{th} day of cultivation (Fig 1a). After this period, cultures had a short late exponential phase and then entered the stationary phase of growth, reaching a final cell density of about 22×10^6 cells mL^{-1} at the end of the of cultivation time (25 days). During the entire period, cells showed the typical morphology of *N. oleoabundans* grown in

BM medium, i.e., almost spherical, with a cell diameter of 3-5 µm (Fig 1b, d). One cup-shaped chloroplast, containing a large pyrenoid, was present and emitted an intense red fluorescence due to the presence of chlorophyll (Fig 1b,c). On the 25th day of cultivation, cells maintained their normal features and dimensions, but some lipid globules accumulated inside the cytoplasm, as revealed by Nile Red staining (Fig 1d,e).

During the first four days of mixotrophic growth in the PBR in the presence of glucose, cells showed an evident increase in cell density, reaching values of ca. 33 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1} (Fig 1f). Subsequently, cells entered the stationary phase of growth, and then cell density leveled off to values of about 36 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1} up to the end of the cultivation period, i.e., eight days. At the beginning of cultivation, both cell shape and size, and chloroplast features in mixotrophic cultures (Fig 1g, h) were similar to those of autotrophic cultures (Fig 1b, c). Starting on the 3rd day and up to the end of cultivation, however, mixotrophic cells showed peculiar features. In fact, the chloroplast lost its characteristic cup shape and translucent globules, which tended to occupy almost the entire cell volume, accumulated inside the cytoplasm (Fig 1i). Nile Red staining confirmed the lipidic nature of these droplets (Fig 1j).

Extracellular FFA composition in E and EG media

The extracellular FFA composition in the exhausted autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media of *N. oleoabundans* is shown in Table 1. While EG medium comprised both saturated and mono-unsaturated FFAs, E medium contained only saturated FFAs. In fact, both samples contained similar percentages of saturated myristic acid (C14:0) and palmitic acid (C16:0), while the percentage of stearic acid (C18:0) was different between the two samples. In E medium, stearic acid was present at about 64%, while in EG medium at about 56%; however, C18:0 represented the main saturated FFA for both samples. It is noteworthy that only EG medium contained about 6% of the monoenoic oleic acid (C18:1ω9).

Polyamine content in E and EG media and in the corresponding N. oleoabundans *cells cultivated in a 20-L PBR*

As shown in Fig 9a, the PA composition of *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated mixotrophically in the PBR were characterized by higher putrescine, spermine, and, especially, spermidine levels compared to cells cultivated autotrophically. In fact, Spm, Put and Spd concentrations in mixotrophic cells were *ca*. 2, 30 and 57 times higher, respectively, than those found in autotrophic cells ($p<0.001$). Conversely, the PA composition in E and EG medium was not significantly different. In fact, both media contained similar amounts of Put and Spm. Interestingly, spermidine was present in high concentration in both media (119 ± 16.91 and 101 ± 5.00 pmol mL^{-1} in E and EG, respectively; Fig 9b).

Growth kinetics of N. oleoabundans *in exhausted and control growth media*

As shown in Fig 2a, the growth of *N. oleoabundans* in E+ medium was promoted for the entire experiment relative to controls grown on BM medium; on the contrary, growth in EG+ medium was similar to that of the C. All samples entered the exponential phase very soon (during the first 3 days of cultivation), despite some differences in growth rates (Fig 2b). The highest μ values were observed for algae cultivated in the two exhausted media (E+ and EG+, 1.29 and 1.18 div d^{-1}, respectively; control, 0.98 div d^{-1}; $p < 0.01$ in both cases relative to C) (Fig 2b). Subsequently, from the 3rd day onwards, no relevant differences were observed between C and EG+ samples, as both of them showed similar growth kinetics and cell densities (Fig 2a). Conversely, E+ samples reached and maintained the highest cell density; the major difference as compared to the other samples was observed starting on the 7th day, with a cell density of about 16×10^6 cells mL^{-1} (45 and 50% more than EG+ and C samples, respectively; $p < 0.01$ in both cases relative to E+ samples) at the same time point. After the 17th day, all samples entered the stationary phase, reaching, at the end of the

experiment, a final cell density of 25-30 × 10^6 cells mL^{-1}. During the experiments, aliquots of samples were periodically harvested to measure the pH of the culture media. As observed in Figure S1, initial pH was very different between control medium (about 7.0) and exhausted media (about 9.5 in both cases). pH gradually increased up to 9.2 in the control medium, whilst in E^+ and EG^+ media the pH varied between 9.5 and 8.0 without any obvious trend.

Consumption of nitrate and phosphate by N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control growth media*

The consumption of nitrate and phosphate by *N. oleoabundans* cells in the course of the experiment is depicted in Fig 3. At time 0 (inoculation), the exhausted replenished growth media contained approximately 2 mM NO_3^- and 0.115 mM PO_4^{2-}, i.e., the typical concentration of those components in BM medium. By the end of the experiment, cells had consumed practically all nitrate and phosphate present in the growth media. However, nutrient consumption by C, E+ and EG+ algal cultures followed different trends, since C samples maintained higher nitrate and phosphate concentrations than samples in exhausted media. In fact, after 12 days of cultivation, cells grown in E+ and EG+ had consumed about 34% and 68% of nitrate, respectively, while C only 15%. Nitrate concentration, decreased from 1.43 mM at time 0 for all culture media to 0.94 mM for E+, 0.45 mM for EG+ and 1.21 mM for C media ($p < 0.001$ in both treated samples relative to C; Fig 3a). Differently, during the first 12 days of growth, phosphate exhibited a dramatic decrease, with a reduction by cells cultivated in EG+ and E+ of 94% and 98%, respectively, while in C medium it was only about 60%. In fact, phosphate concentration decreased from about 0.086 mM at time 0 for all culture media to 0.002 for E+, 0.005 for EG+ and 0.035 mM for C media ($p < 0.001$ in both treated samples relative to C; Fig 3b).

Photosynthetic pigment content in N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control media*

During the experiment a gradual increase in photosynthetic pigment content was observed in all samples (Fig 4). Chl*a* in algae grown in C medium showed an evident increase up to the end of the experiment, reaching an average concentration of 0.5 nmol 10^{-6} cells (Fig 4a). A similar increasing trend was also observed in E+ samples, though with values 10-15% lower than those of controls. From the 17th day of cultivation, Chl*a* content of E+ samples was significantly lower than in C (32%; $p<0.01$). Conversely, in EG+ samples Chl*a* content showed a slightly increasing trend as compared with C and E+ samples; this led to a final value of 0.35 nmol 10^{-6} cells at the end of the experiment (32 and 21% lower than C and E+ samples, respectively; Fig 4a). An increasing trend in Chl*b* content was also observed for all samples, without significant differences between C and E+ samples (Fig 4b). Similar to Chl*a* content, EG+ cells contained lower quantities of Chl*b* than C and E+ samples (15-25% and 20-35% lower than C and E+ samples, respectively). More evident differences were observed for Car content (Fig 4c). In fact, C samples showed an evident increase up to the end of the experiment, always containing higher quantities compared to the other samples (20-45% and 15-30% more than E+ and EG+ samples, respectively; $p<0.05$). It is noteworthy that EG+ and E+ cells shared a similar trend of Car concentration during the experiment (Fig 4c).

Maximum quantum yield of PSII of N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control media*

The variations in PSII maximum quantum yield measured during the experiments are shown in Fig 5. C, E+ and EG+ samples showed a slight increase of the F_V/F_M ratio during the first three days of growth, reaching values of ca. 0.70. Subsequently, C cells maintained stable values around 0.70-0.75, while the F_V/F_M ratio of E+ and EG+ samples decreased drastically down to values below 0.50 at the end of experiment. In EG+ cells the decrease was dramatic already from the 3rd day of cultivation, reaching the lowest value after 17 days (ca. 0.30 for EG+ *vs* 0.75 for C and 0.50 for E+; $p<0.01$ in both cases); thereafter, samples maintained stable values of ca. 0.35 until the end of the experiment. On the contrary, in E+ cells, F_V/F_M started to decrease very strongly only from the

7th day of cultivation until the 17th day (from about 0.70 at day 7 down to 0.50 at day 17). During the subsequent experimental times (21th and 25th day), the F_V/F_M ratio of E+ cells remained stable around 0.45.

Morphological observations of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in exhausted and control media

Light microscopy and Nile Red staining

Light microscopy of both control and treated samples showed that *N. oleoabundans* maintained similar cell morphology and dimensions throughout the experiment (Fig 6, 7). In fact, cells were almost spherical with a cell diameter of 3-5 μm. One cup-shaped chloroplast, containing a large pyrenoid, was present inside the cells (Fig 6a, c, e). Moreover, the chloroplast emitted an intense red fluorescence due to Chl (Fig 6b, d, f). Interestingly, after 25 days of cultivation, while cell size and shape remained substantially unchanged, all algal samples showed some translucent granulation at the cytoplasmic level (Fig 7a, c, e). In order to understand the nature of those granulations and to investigate if the recycled growth media could promote the production of lipid globules, all samples were periodically stained with the lipid-specific fluorochrome Nile Red. The reaction was positive only at the end of the experiment and the translucent globules were then unequivocally identified as lipid droplets (Fig 7b, d, f).

TEM observations

To investigate the morphological and cytological changes induced by cultivation in recycled growth media, the ultrastructure of C, E+ and EG+ samples was observed by TEM. At 12 days of cultivation, most of the C cell volume was occupied by a characteristic cup-shaped chloroplast. Inside the plastid one large pyrenoid, which was crossed by two elongated and appressed thylakoids, was present (Fig 8a). In particular, the organelle contained starch in the shape of a shell around the pyrenoid, and showed the typical thylakoid organization (Fig 8b). Typically featured

chloroplasts, as described for cells grown in C, were observed in cells grown in E+ medium (Fig 8c); however, thylakoids were more appressed than in C (Fig 8d). EG+ samples showed a more strongly altered chloroplast structure (Fig 8e), as compared with C and E+ samples. Photosynthetic membranes showed different degrees of thylakoid appression: some portions of thylakoid membranes were appressed while others were loose and sometimes swollen (Fig 8f,g). In addition, large portions of the stroma were free of thylakoids and some plastoglobules in proximity of the thylakoid membranes were also visible (Fig 8g, h). Finally, in EG+ samples the pyrenoid lost its round shape and appeared malformed (Fig 8e).

~~*Extracellular FFA composition in E and EG media*~~

~~The extracellular FFA composition in the exhausted autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media of *N. oleoabundans* is shown in Table 1. While EG medium comprised both saturated and mono-unsaturated FFAs, E medium contained only saturated FFAs. In fact, both samples contained similar percentages of saturated myristic acid (C14:0) and palmitic acid (C16:0), while the percentage of stearic acid (C18:0) was different between the two samples. In E medium, stearic acid was present at about 64%, while in EG medium at about 56%; however, C18:0 represented the main saturated FFA for both samples. It is noteworthy that only EG medium contained about 6% of the monoenoic oleic acid (C18:1ω9).~~

~~*Polyamine content in E and EG media and in the corresponding* N. oleoabundans *cells cultivated in a 20-L PBR*~~

~~As shown in Fig 9a, the PA composition of *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated mixotrophically in the PBR were characterized by higher putrescine, spermine, and, especially, spermidine levels compared to cells cultivated autotrophically. In fact, Spm, Put and Spd concentrations in~~

~~mixotrophic cells were *ca*. 2, 30 and 57 times higher, respectively, than those found in autotrophic cells ($p<0.001$). Conversely, the PA composition in E and EG medium was not significantly different. In fact, both media contained similar amounts of Put and Spm. Interestingly, spermidine was present in high concentration in both media (119 ± 16.91 and 101 ± 5.00 pmol mL^{-1} in E and EG, respectively; Fig 9b).~~

Discussion

The recycling of culture medium has been proposed as a possible solution in order to reduce water consumption for algal cultivation, thereby making the process more economically feasible and environmentally sustainable (Yang et al. 2011; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2013; Farooq et al. 2014). Yang et al. (2011) estimated that the large-scale cultivation of the microalga *Chlorella vulgaris* in recycled culture medium could reduce water use by about 84%. Present results clearly suggest that *N. oleoabundans* can also efficiently grow in exhausted growth media, especially in the autotrophic medium replenished with nitrate and phosphate (E+). Observing the consumption trend of these main nutrients (Fig. 3), it is clear that in the exhausted media their concentration decreased faster with respect to controls in parallel to the enhanced cell growth. Moreover, phosphate was consumed faster than nitrate by all samples, probably because of its 100 times lower concentration with respect to the latter nutrient (0.2 gL^{-1} of nitrate *vs* 0.002 gL^{-1} of phosphate; Baldisserotto et al., 2012). Thus, in order to make the use of recycled culture medium feasible, exhausted media should be replenished with the correct ratio of nitrate and phosphate, as they are the main nutrients that guarantee cell growth (Stephens et al. 2010). This aspect was preliminarily verified by employing unmodified exhausted growth media (E and EG) to re-cultivate *N. oleoabundans*. In fact, cells showed a slight growth, reaching, at the end of the cultivation period, low cell densities (ca. 11 *vs* 32×10^6 cells mL^{-1} of C cultures) (data not shown). These cells accumulated intracellular lipids throughout the experiment (data not shown) as a consequence of the limitation of nitrate and

phosphate (Mata et al. 2010; Popovich et al. 2012). These results are consistent with those of Zhu et al. (2013), who found that *C. zofingensis* cultivated in recycled medium, without nitrogen and phosphorus, displayed enhanced lipid production compared to cultures with full nutrients.

In order to understand if the growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in E+ and EG+, relative to C, was influenced by some molecules released from the algae, a characterization of autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media was performed. First of all, pH of the control and exhausted media was monitored. In particular, an increasing trend was observed in control, which reached the pH of the exhausted media at the end of the experiment. This was not surprisingly, considering that during the microalgal growth pH usually increases because of the consumption of CO_2 during the photosynthetic process (Zhang et al., 2014). However, considering that in E^+ and EG^+ pH fluctuated around their initial values, or at least gradually decreased, it is not possible to attribute to pH any evident role in the cell growth promotion. ~~In fact,~~ Moheimani and Borowitzka (2006) and Stephen et al. (2010) reported that molecules released from cells can positively/negatively alter cell metabolism and biomass production.

Here we show that both exhausted media contained the main PAs (putrescine, spermidine, and spermine). It is known that these plant growth regulators are involved in a great variety of developmental processes in plant cells, e.g., cell division and protein synthesis (Kaur-Sawhney et al. 2003; Kuznetsova et al. 2006). PA biosynthetic pathways have also been studied in green algae (Cohen et al. 1984; Theiss et al. 2002; Fuell et al. 2010). Although algae produce "unusual" PAs, such as homospermidine and thermospermine (Hamana et al. 2013), the more common PAs (Put, Spd and Spm), when added to the media, promoted growth and metabolism in *C. vulgaris* (Czerpak et al. 2003). PAs are also known to alleviate the effect of biotic and abiotic stress in plants as well as algae (Tate et al. 2013).

In the present work, a very strong increase in Put and, especially, Spd concentrations was observed in *N. oleoabundans* mixotrophic cells as compared to the autotrophic ones, both cultivated in a 20-L PBR. The growth-promoting role of PAs could explain the faster (0-4 days) and stronger cell

density increase (ca. 33 x 10^6 cell mL^{-1}) in mixotrophic cultures relative to the autotrophic ones (0-9 days; ca. 22 x 10^6 cell mL^{-1}). The higher PA concentrations in mixotrophically grown cells also suggest that, under these culture conditions, algal cells may be better protected from stress-inducing factors, e.g., bacterial contamination. To our knowledge, the presence of PAs released into algal growth medium in PBRs has not been documented before. The release of PAs (predominantly Spd) from autotrophic and mixotrophic cells into their respective (E and EG) exhausted media was not significantly different. However, the presence of these plant growth regulators seems to contribute to the promotion of *N. oleoabundans* growth in both media replenished with nitrate and phosphate. In fact, during the entire experiment, a higher cell density was observed in E+ relative to C medium. Moreover, the EG+ samples showed a promotion of cell density, albeit similar to that of C.

Both autotrophic and mixotrophic exhausted media also contained FFAs, which could have induced a change in the normal metabolism of *N. oleoabundans*. This assumption is demonstrated by the more rapid consumption of nitrate and phosphate, the decreased photosynthetic pigments content and the strong decline in the F_V/F_M ratio observed in cells grown in E+ and EG+ media. These results corroborate the assumption that microalgae release metabolites in high cell density cultures (Richmond 2004) or as a consequence of stressful conditions (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006). Even if the role of FFAs is currently under debate (Ikawa 2004; Stephen et al. 2010), recent studies showed that they can strongly inhibit growth or exert cytotoxic effects on microalgae (Kogteva and Bezuglov 1998; Wu et al. 2006; Bosma et al. 2008; Stephen et al. 2010). In fact, the presence of these metabolites, and their oxidative products, negatively affect biomass productivity, especially when the microalgae are cultivated in recycled medium (Lívanský et al. 1996; Rodolfi et al. 2003). Granum et al. (2002) reported that the accumulation of intracellular lipids in microalgae enhanced the release of FFAs into the culture medium, and Harun et al. (2010) observed that this release was caused by cell lysis.

In this work, FFA composition in autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media after *N. oleoabundans* cultivation was similar. The only main difference was represented by the presence of

the monoenoic oleic acid (C18:1ω9) in EG medium. Oleic acid is one of the major lipid components in lipid-enriched *N. oleoabundans* grown under N-stress conditions (Popovich et al. 2012). It is reported that mixotrophic cultivation alters N:C ratio, inducing similar lipid production as N-depleted autotrophic cultures (Giovanardi et al. 2014). Probably for this reason, the release of oleic acid occurred only in the mixotrophic growth medium. Moreover, Wu et al. (2006) observed altered plasma membrane permeability due to the toxic effects of FFAs in two *Chlorophyta* (*C. vulgaris* and *Monoraphidium contortum*) and in a cyanobacterium (*Anabaena* P-9). Then, in addition to the lower concentration with respect to nitrate in BM medium, ~~T~~the rapid consumption of phosphate in both exhausted media could be linked also to an alteration in membrane permeability, due to the activity of FFAs (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006). In addition, FFAs can cause inhibition of the PSII and PSI electron transport chains (Siegenthaler 1973) and disorganization of thylakoids (Wu et al. 2006). Indeed, *N. oleoabundans* cells in E+ and EG+ were characterized by alterations of the photosynthetic apparatus. These cells, in fact, contained less photosynthetic pigments than C cells, and exhibited a drastic decrease of the PSII maximum quantum yield (F_V/F_M). These variations are linked to an alteration of photosynthetic efficiency, especially as regards PSII (White et al. 2011). The decreased photosynthetic pigment contents, observed in cells grown in E+ and EG+, also reflected the changes in thylakoid membrane arrangement (Baldisserotto et al. 2012). Therefore, correct thylakoid organization is necessary to maintain optimal photosynthetic activity and this is often influenced by culture conditions (Nevo et al. 2012). In addition, the presence of some plastoglobules in chloroplasts of algal cells, grown on exhausted media, could be another indicator of an alteration of photosynthetic membranes (Besagni and Kessler 2013). On the contrary, *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in C medium showed stable and normal F_V/F_M values throughout the experiment (Giovanardi et al. 2014), and the typical assembly of thylakoid membranes (Nevo et al. 2012; Baldisserotto et al. 2012; Giovanardi et al. 2014).

The presence of lipid droplets, observed only at the end of the experiment in C, E+ and EG+ cells, is probably related to aging of the microalgal cultures (Hu et al. 2008; Baldisserotto et al. 2012),

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rather than to the use of recycled culture media.

In conclusion, results presented here demonstrate that recycling autotrophic and mixotrophic growth media is a suitable solution to obtain high cell density cultures of the microalga *N. oleoabundans*. For this reason, they represent a contribution for improving the scale-up of microalgal cultivation while providing a more sustainable ecological impact on water resources. However, further studies are needed to deepen knowledge on the nature and the specific role of some molecules that are released into the growth media, in order to obtain useful information for the advancement of the biotechnological use of this strain.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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Figure captions:

Fig 1 (**a-e)** Growth kinetics (**a**) and morphology (**b-e**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells autotrophically cultivated in a 20-L PBR in BM medium. Light (**b, d**) and fluorescence microscope observations (**c, e**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 3 (**b, c**) and 25 (**d, e**) days of autotrophic cultivation. (**f-j**) Growth kinetics (**f**) and cell morphology (**g-j**) of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in a 20-L PBR in BM medium under mixotrophic conditions (supplemented with 2.5 gL^{-1} of glucose). Light (**g, i**) and fluorescence microscope observations (**h, j**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 3 (**g, h**) and 8 (**d, e**) days of mixotrophic cultivation. In both graphs, curves are constructed on a $\log_2$ scale and data are means ± s.d. (n=3). In all micrographs, bars: 2 µm

Fig 2 (a) Growth kinetics of *N. oleoabundans* in BM medium (filled circles), E+ medium (empty squares) and EG+ medium (empty diamonds). (**b)** Growth rates, calculated during the exponential phase (0–3 days time interval of cultivation), of cells grown in BM (white), E+ (light grey) and EG+ (dark grey) media. The growth curve is constructed on a $\log_2$ scale and data are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 3 Time-course variations in the concentrations of nitrate (**a**) and of phosphate (**b**) in culture media of *N. oleoabundans* during 25 days of cultivation on BM medium (white), E+ medium (light grey) and EG+ medium (dark grey). Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 4 Time-course variations of Chl*a* (**a**), Chl*b* (**b**) and Car content (**c**) in *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in BM (filled circles), E+ (empty squares) and EG+ (empty diamonds) media during the 25 days of cultivation. Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 5 Time-course variations of PSII maximum quantum yield (F_V/F_M ratio) in *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in BM (filled circles), E+ (empty squares) and EG+ (empty diamonds) media during the 25 days of cultivation. Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 6 Light and fluorescence microscopy observations of *N. oleoabundans* cells at 12 days of cultivation. (**a)** Control cells and **(b**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast; (**c)** cell grown in E+ medium and (**d**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast; (**e)** cell grown in EG+ medium and (**f**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast. In all micrographs, bars: 2 μm

Fig 7 Light and epifluorescence pictures of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 25 days of growth. (**a)** Control cells and (**b**) relative Nile Red-staining observation, (**c**) cells grown in E+ medium and (**d**) relative Nile Red-staining observation, and (**e)** cells grown in E+ medium and (**f**) relative Nile Red-staining observation in EG+ medium. Translucent globules are indicated with arrows. In all micrographs, bars: 2 μm

Fig **8** Transmission electron micrographs of *N. oleoabundans* cells at 12 days of cultivation. (**a**) Cell grown in BM medium and (**b**) detail of its chloroplast showing the typical thylakoid membranes organization (white arrow). (**c**) Cell grown in E+ medium and (**d**) detail of its chloroplast with quite compact and appressed (white arrow) thylakoids. (**e**) Cell grown in EG+ medium and (**f-h**) details of its chloroplast. The presence of intermediate stages of thylakoid membranes are evident in EG+ cells, showing a general disorganisation of thylakoid membranes (**f-h**), which appeared wavy, loose and sometimes swollen (**f, g**). (**h**) Some plastoglobules in proximity of thylakoid membranes are also observed (arrowheads). P, pyrenoid; N, nucleus, M, mithochondrion. Bars: 0.5 μm (a, c, e); 0.05 μm (b, d, f, g, h)

Fig **9** Polyamine concentrations **(a)** in *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated in a 20-L PBR autotrophically and mixotrophically at 15 and 8 days of cultivation, respectively, and (**b)** in the corresponding exhausted E and EG growth media. Autotrophic cells (white), mixotrophic cells (dark), E+ (light grey) and EG+ medium (dark grey). Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Re-cultivation of *Neochloris oleoabundans* in exhausted autotrophic and mixotrophic media: the potential role of polyamines and free fatty acids

Alessandra Sabia[1], Costanza Baldisserotto[1], Stefania Biondi[2], Roberta Marchesini[1], Paola Tedeschi[3], Annalisa Maietti[3], Martina Giovanardi[1], Lorenzo Ferroni[1], Simonetta Pancaldi[1]

[1]Department of Life Sciences and Biotechnology, University of Ferrara, Corso Ercole I d'Este 32, 44121 Ferrara, Italy.

[2]Department of Biological, Geological and Environmental Sciences, University of Bologna, via Irnerio 42, 40126 Bologna, Italy.

[3]Department of Chemical and Pharmaceutical Science, University of Ferrara, via Fossato di Mortara 17, 44121 Ferrara, Italy.

*Corresponding Author. Tel: +39 0532 293786; Fax: +39 0532 208561; E-mail address: simonetta.pancaldi@unife.it.

ABSTRACT

Neochloris oleoabundans (*Chlorophyta*) is widely considered one of the most promising microalgae for biotechnological applications. However, the large-scale production of microalgae requires large amounts of water. In this perspective, the possibility of using exhausted growth media for the re-cultivation of *N. oleoabundans* was investigated in order to simultaneously make the cultivation more economically feasible and environmentally sustainable. Experiments were performed by testing the following media: autotrophic exhausted medium (E+) and mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose (EG+) of *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in a 20-L

photobioreactor (PBR). Both exhausted media were replenished with the same amounts of nitrate and phosphate as the control brackish medium (C). Growth kinetics, nitrate and phosphate consumption, photosynthetic pigments content, photosynthetic efficiency, cell morphology, and lipid production were evaluated. Moreover, the free fatty acid (FFA) composition of exhausted media and the polyamine (PA) concentrations of both algae and media were analyzed in order to test if some molecules, released into the medium, could influence algal growth and metabolism. Results showed that *N. oleoabundans* can efficiently grow in both exhausted media, if appropriately replenished with the main nutrients (E+ and EG+), especially in E+ and to the same extent as in C medium. Growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* was attributed to PAs and alteration of the photosynthetic apparatus to FFAs. Taken together, results show that recycling growth medium is a suitable solution to obtain good *N. oleoabundans* biomass concentrations, while providing a more sustainable ecological impact on water resources.

Keywords:

Neochloris oleoabundans

Recycling culture media

Photosynthetic apparatus

Biomass production

Polyamines

Free fatty acids

Introduction

Over the last decades, microalgae have received much attention as promising high-potential feedstock for biodiesel (Chisti 2007; Li et al. 2008; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013) and as an attractive raw material for the production of a wide range of high value bioproducts (Molina Grima et al. 2003; Mata et al. 2010). They are photosynthetic microorganisms with numerous key features, which potentially make them a more appreciable renewable source than terrestrial plants (Richmond 2004; Hu et al 2008; Ndimba et al. 2013). For instance, these microorganisms have faster growth rates, higher photosynthetic efficiencies, higher rates of carbon dioxide fixation, and higher biomass productivities compared to plants (Richmond 2004; Gouveia et al. 2009; Harun et al. 2010; Mata et al. 2010). Moreover, microalgae can thrive in non-arable lands being able to grow in waters having different salinity levels and chemical composition (Smith et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013).

The environmental and economical impact of large-scale production of microalgae has been widely discussed, with the aim of making the process increasingly sustainable (Sheehan 2009; Solomon 2010). In this perspective, microalgal cultivation systems are crucial factors to be taken into account (Smith et al. 2010; Stephens et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013). A wide variety of systems has been described by Mata and co-workers (2010) and recently by Borowitzka and Moheimani (2013). Microalgae can be cultivated in open pond reactors or closed photobioreactors (PBRs), depending on algal strain, issue of research, type of desired products and environmental conditions (Chisti 2007; Mata et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013). Although open ponds are the most commonly used culture systems, due to their low cost of production and operation, recently closed PBRs are receiving much attention for the possibility of producing valuable compounds (Pulz 2001; Grobbelaar 2009; Smith et al. 2010). However, algal cultures require large amounts of water in both culture systems (Lam and Lee 2012; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013).

Considering that water is becoming a scarce natural resource, water demand represents an important factor when performing large-scale cultivation (Batan et al. 2013; Farooq et al. 2014). In order to reduce the high production costs and, at the same time, to make microalgal production more environmentally sustainable, recycling culture medium has been proposed as a possible solution (Yang et al. 2011; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2012; Farooq et al. 2014), especially in large-scale culture systems (Borowitzka 2005; Lam and Lee 2012; Zhu et al. 2013). However, the feasibility of recycling growth medium to re-cultivate microalgae has been tested only in a few cases (Lívanský et al. 1996; Rodolfi et al. 2003; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2013; Zhu et al. 2013). It is reported that the recycling medium could have negative effects on biomass productivity, due to the release of inhibitory secondary metabolites (Richmond 2004). Harmful metabolites are, in fact, released during microalgal growth under physiological stress (Ikawa 2004; Moheimani and Borowitzka 2006). Free fatty acids (FFAs), and substances derived from the photooxidation of unsaturated fatty acids, are the most common metabolites with inhibitory effects on microalgae (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006; Bosma et al. 2008; Stephen et al. 2010).

In the present work, the suitability of recycling growth media for the re-cultivation of *Neochloris oleoabundans* (*Chlorophyta*) was investigated. This species was chosen because it is considered one of the most promising oil-rich microalgae, due to its capability to accumulate lipids when grown under nitrogen starvation (Tornabene et al. 1983; Chisti 2007; Li et al. 2008; Pruvost et al. 2009) or mixotrophically, in the presence of glucose, or carbon-rich wastes, as organic carbon sources (Giovanardi et al. 2013; Baldisserotto et al. 2014). Present results clearly indicate that *N. oleoabundans* can efficiently grow in its exhausted growth medium, if suitably replenished with the main nutrients. Based on this encouraging result, and with the aim of gaining further knowledge on the morpho-physiological aspects and biotechnological applications of this algal strain, the following features were analyzed: (1) growth kinetics in parallel to nitrate and phosphate consumption; (2) photosynthetic pigment content; (3) PSII maximum quantum yield; (4) cell morphology, with special attention to intracellular lipid accumulation, (5) FFA accumulation in

recycled growth media, and (6) polyamine (PA) concentration both inside cells and in the corresponding culture media. PAs were determined in order to understand if these plant growth regulators could be responsible for the growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* in recycled growth medium. It is known, in fact, that PAs, together with other plant growth regulators, have stimulatory effects on algal growth and metabolism, and are involved in mitigating various types of biotic and abiotic stress (Tate et al. 2013).

Materials and Methods

Algal strains and culture condition

The strain used in this study was the *Chlorophyta N. oleoabundans* UTEX 1185 (syn. *Ettlia oleoabundans*) (*Sphaeropleales, Neochloridaceae*), obtained from the Culture Collection of Algae of the University of Texas (UTEX, Austin, Texas, USA; www.utex.org).

N. oleoabundans was cultivated in axenic liquid brackish medium (BM) (Baldisserotto et al. 2012) in a coaxial 20-L capacity PBR (M2M Engineering, Grazzanise, Caserta, Italy). Algae were cultivated autotrophically in BM for 25 days or mixotrophically, by addition of 2.5 g L^{-1} glucose, for 8 days, according to previously described protocols (Baldisserotto et al. 2014; Giovanardi et al. 2014). For autotrophic cultivation, cells were inoculated into the PBR to obtain an initial cell density of about 0.6 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}, while for mixotrophic cultivation initial cell density was higher (10 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}). Culture conditions in the PBR were: 24 ± 1°C; sterile air injection at the bottom of the PBR, with 0.5/3.5 h bubbling/static cycles; irradiance 65 $\mu mol_{photons}$ m^{-2} s^{-1} of PAR (16:8 h light:dark photoperiod). Light was supplied with inner cool–white fluorescent Philips tubes.

Algal growth and morphology in the PBR were monitored as described below.

Preparation of growth media

Experiments were performed by testing the following media:

- C: freshly prepared BM medium (control);

- E: autotrophic exhausted medium;

- EG: mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose;

- E+: autotrophic exhausted medium replenished with nitrate and phosphate concentrations as for BM medium;

- EG+: mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose and replenished with nutrients as in E+.

In order to obtain the exhausted media for the recycling experiment, *N. oleoabundans* was grown inside the PBR under the culture conditions described in the previous section. For E+ medium preparation, about 500 mL of autotrophic algal culture in the stationary phase of growth (at the 15^{th} day of cultivation in the PBR) were centrifuged at 2,000 *g* for 10 min in order to separate the medium from the algae, thus obtaining an autotrophic exhausted medium (E). The medium appeared pale-yellow and was free from algae, bacteria and protozoa; its optical density at a wavelength of 750 nm (OD_{750}) was 0.02. For EG+ medium, at the 8^{th} day of cultivation in the PBR, the same aliquots of algal culture were harvested by centrifugation (2,000 *g* for 10 min). In this case, the mixotrophic exhausted medium (EG) was straw-yellow in colour and presented a weak bacterial contamination due to the glucose addition (OD_{750} =0.009). Glucose was proved to be totally consumed during the previous cultivation inside the PBR by 3,5-dinitrosalicylic (DNS; Sigma-Aldrich, Gallarate, Milan, Italy) acid assay, according to Giovanardi et al. (2014). In both exhausted media, pH was not adjusted. After determining the nitrate and phosphate concentrations of the two exhausted media (see "Nitrate and phosphate analyses"), KNO_3 and K_2HPO_4 were axenically added to reach final concentrations of 0.2 and 0.02 g L^{-1}, respectively, i.e., the typical concentration of those components in BM, thus obtaining the replenished exhausted media (E+ and

EG+) used for experiments.

Experimental design

When autotrophic cultures of *N. oleoabundans*, grown in BM in the PBR, reached a cell density of 10 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1} (after about 9 days of cultivation), aliquots of cells were inoculated into 300-mL Erlenmeyer flasks (150 mL total volume) containing C, E+, EG+ media, to obtain an initial cell density of about 0.5 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}. The cultures were placed in a growth chamber (24 ± 1 °C, 80 $\mu mol_{photons}$ m^{-2} s^{-1} of PAR with a 16:8 h light-darkness photoperiod), and cultivated with continuous shaking at 80 rpm, without external CO_2 supply. Experiments were performed in triplicate. Aliquots of cultures (cells and media) were collected at different times of cultivation up to 25 days, depending on the analysis.

Analyses

Growth evaluation

Aliquots of cell samples cultivated in control and exhausted media were counted at 0, 3, 7, 12, 17 and 25 days of cultivation using a Thoma haemocytometer (HBG, Giessen, Germany) under a light microscope (Zeiss, model Axiophot) and growth curves were obtained.

The growth rate (μ, number of divisions per day) during the exponential phase was calculated with the following equation:

$$\mu \text{ (div } d^{-1}) = (\log_2 N_1 - \log_2 N_0) / (t_1 - t_0),$$

where μ is the growth rate, N_1 the cell number at time t_1, N_0 the cell number at time 0 and $t_1 - t_0$ the time interval (days) (Giovanardi et al. 2013).

In parallel to growth, pH was also periodically monitored on small aliquots of samples.

Nitrate and phosphate analyses

After 12 and 25 days of cultivation, samples of C, E+ and EG+ media were harvested by centrifugation to analyze nitrate and phosphate concentrations. These nutrients were quantified colorimetrically using a flow-injection autoanalyzer (FlowSys, Systea, Roma, Italy).

Photosynthetic pigment extraction and quantification

For photosynthetic pigment analysis, cell samples were collected by centrifugation after 0, 7, 17, 21 and 25 days of cultivation. Extraction of photosynthetic pigments was performed according to Baldisserotto et al. (2014). The extracts were measured with a Pharmacia Ultrospec 2000 UV-Vis spectrophotometer (1-nm bandwidth; Amersham Biosciences, Piscataway, NJ, USA) at 666 (chlorophyll *a* - Chl*a*), 653 (chlorophyll *b* - Chl*b*) and 470 nm (carotenoids - Car). Quantification was performed according to equations reported in Wellburn (1994).

PAM fluorimetry

The PSII maximum quantum yield of algae was determined at the same cultivation times considered for growth kinetics measurements. A pulse amplitude modulated fluorometer (ADC Bioscientific Ltd, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, UK) was used to determine the *in vivo* chlorophyll fluorescence of PSII. The PSII maximum quantum yield is reported as F_V/F_M ratio, *i.e.* $(F_M - F_0)/F_M$, where variable fluorescence is $F_V = (F_M - F_0)$, F_M is the maximum fluorescence and F_0 is the initial fluorescence of samples (Lichtenthaler et al. 2005). This measurement is considered a valid method to probe the maximum quantum yield of photochemistry in PSII (Kalaji et al. 2014). Moreover, it is useful to estimate the physiological state of plants and microorganisms also under nutrient stress (White et al. 2011). Samples were prepared as reported in Ferroni et al. (2011) after 15 min of dark incubation.

Light and fluorescence microscopy

For microscopic observations, cell samples were routinely collected throughout the cultivation period inside the PBR and during the experiment with exhausted media. Aliquots of samples were observed using a microscope (Zeiss, model Axiophot) with conventional and fluorescent attachments. The light source for chlorophyll fluorescence observation was a HBO 100 W pressure mercury vapour lamp (filter set, BP436/10, LP470). Pictures of cells were taken with a Canon IXUS 110 IS digital camera (12.1 megapixels), mounted on the ocular lens through a Leica DC150 system (Leica Camera AG, Solms, Germany).

Lipid staining

During experiments, the intracellular presence of lipids was evaluated by staining cells with the fluorochrome Nile Red (9-diethylamina-5Hbenzo[α]phenoxazine-5-one, 0.5 mg dissolved in 100 mL acetone; Sigma-Aldrich, Gallarate, Milan, Italy), as described in Giovanardi et al. (2014). After incubation at 37°C in darkness for 15 min, cells were observed with the microscope described above at an excitation wavelength of 485 nm (filter set, BP485, LP520). Photographs were taken with the camera described above.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM)

TEM observations were made on cells harvested by centrifugation (600 *g*, 10 min) at the 12th day of cultivation. Cells were fixed, post-fixed and dehydrated as reported in Baldisserotto et al. (2012). Embedding in resin and staining procedures were performed as previously described (Pancaldi et al. 2002). Sections were observed with a Hitachi H800 electron microscope (Hitachi, Tokyo, Japan) at the Electron Microscopy Centre, University of Ferrara.

Extracellular free fatty acids analysis

To analyze the FFA composition of the exhausted E and EG media used to prepare E+ and EG+ replenished media, aliquots of *N. oleoabundans* cultures grown autotrophically and mixotrophically in the PBR were collected at the 15th and at the 8th day of cultivation, respectively. Samples were centrifuged at 2,000 *g* for 10 min in order to separate the medium from algae. Fifty mL of media obtained from the autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) cultures were freeze-dried for analysis. The extracellular FFA composition was determined in duplicate by gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS). For extraction, samples were dissolved in 3 mL of hexane, sonicated for 15 min and extracted overnight. Fatty acid methyl esters were prepared by transesterification with 1.5 mL of 5% of sodium hydroxide in methanol solution. Sample volumes of 1 µl were injected into the GC-MS apparatus, which consisted of a Varian Saturn 2100 MS/MS ion trap mass spectrometer. Separations were performed using a Zebron ZB-WAX Phenomenex capillary column (60 cm in length, 0.25 mm i.d) supplied with helium carrier gas at 1 mL min^{-1} constant flow. The injector temperature was 250 °C and the oven temperature program was the following: start 100°C for 2 min, ramp to 200°C at 10 °C/min, and hold for 108 min. The MS acquisitions were performed by full scan mode.

Determination of polyamines

To analyze the free PA composition of *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in PBR and in the corresponding E and EG media, samples were collected as described for FFA analyses. Freeze-dried E or EG media and algae (50 and 20 mg, respectively) were extracted in cold 4% perchloric acid, kept for 1 h on ice, and then centrifuged at 15,000 *g* for 15 min. Aliquots (200 µL) of the supernatants and standard solutions of putrescine (Put), spermidine (Spd) and spermine (Spm) were derivatised with dansyl chloride (Scaramagli et al. 1999). Dansylated derivatives were extracted with toluene, taken to dryness and resuspended in

acetonitrile. PAs were separated and quantified by HPLC using a reverse phase C_{18} column (Spherisorb ODS2, 5-µm particle diameter, 4.6 x 250 mm, Waters, Wexford, Ireland) and a programmed acetonitrile:water step gradient (flow rate 1 mL min^{-1}) on a Jasco system (Jasco Corp., Tokyo, Japan) consisting of a PU-1580 pump, an LG-1580-02 ternary gradient unit, a DG-1580-53 three-line degasser and a FP-1529 fluorescence detector, linked to an autosampler (AS 2055 Plus).

Data analysis

Data were processed with Graphpad Prism 6 (Graph Pad Software, San Diego CA, USA). In each case, means ± standard deviations for *n* number of samples are given. Statistical analyses for comparison of means were carried out using ANOVA, followed by Student's *t*-test (significance level, 0.05).

Results

Growth and morphology of N. oleoabundans *cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in a 20-L PBR*

Growth kinetics and cell morphology of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in a 20-L PBR are shown in Fig 1. Autotrophic cells rapidly entered the exponential phase starting on the 2^{nd}-3^{rd} day up to the 7^{th}-9^{th} day of cultivation (Fig 1a). After this period, cultures had a short late exponential phase and then entered the stationary phase of growth, reaching a final cell density of about 22×10^6 cells mL^{-1} at the end of the of cultivation time (25 days). During the entire period, cells showed the typical morphology of *N. oleoabundans* grown in BM medium, i.e., almost spherical, with a cell diameter of 3-5 µm (Fig 1b, d). One cup-shaped chloroplast, containing a large pyrenoid, was present and emitted an intense red fluorescence due to the presence of chlorophyll (Fig 1b,c). On the 25^{th} day of cultivation, cells maintained their normal

features and dimensions, but some lipid globules accumulated inside the cytoplasm, as revealed by Nile Red staining (Fig 1d,e).

During the first four days of mixotrophic growth in the PBR in the presence of glucose, cells showed an evident increase in cell density, reaching values of ca. 33 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1} (Fig 1f). Subsequently, cells entered the stationary phase of growth, and then cell density leveled off to values of about 36 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1} up to the end of the cultivation period, i.e., eight days. At the beginning of cultivation, both cell shape and size, and chloroplast features in mixotrophic cultures (Fig 1g, h) were similar to those of autotrophic cultures (Fig 1b, c). Starting on the 3rd day and up to the end of cultivation, however, mixotrophic cells showed peculiar features. In fact, the chloroplast lost its characteristic cup shape and translucent globules, which tended to occupy almost the entire cell volume, accumulated inside the cytoplasm (Fig 1i). Nile Red staining confirmed the lipidic nature of these droplets (Fig 1j).

Extracellular FFA composition in E and EG media

The extracellular FFA composition in the exhausted autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media of *N. oleoabundans* is shown in Table 1. While EG medium comprised both saturated and mono-unsaturated FFAs, E medium contained only saturated FFAs. In fact, both samples contained similar percentages of saturated myristic acid (C14:0) and palmitic acid (C16:0), while the percentage of stearic acid (C18:0) was different between the two samples. In E medium, stearic acid was present at about 64%, while in EG medium at about 56%; however, C18:0 represented the main saturated FFA for both samples. It is noteworthy that only EG medium contained about 6% of the monoenoic oleic acid (C18:1ω9).

Polyamine content in E and EG media and in the corresponding N. oleoabundans *cells cultivated in a 20-L PBR*

As shown in Fig 9a, the PA composition of *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated mixotrophically in the

PBR were characterized by higher putrescine, spermine, and, especially, spermidine levels compared to cells cultivated autotrophically. In fact, Spm, Put and Spd concentrations in mixotrophic cells were *ca*. 2, 30 and 57 times higher, respectively, than those found in autotrophic cells ($p<0.001$). Conversely, the PA composition in E and EG medium was not significantly different. In fact, both media contained similar amounts of Put and Spm. Interestingly, spermidine was present in high concentration in both media (119 ± 16.91 and 101 ± 5.00 pmol mL^{-1} in E and EG, respectively; Fig 9b).

Growth kinetics of N. oleoabundans *in exhausted and control growth media*

As shown in Fig 2a, the growth of *N. oleoabundans* in E+ medium was promoted for the entire experiment relative to controls grown on BM medium; on the contrary, growth in EG+ medium was similar to that of the C. All samples entered the exponential phase very soon (during the first 3 days of cultivation), despite some differences in growth rates (Fig 2b). The highest μ values were observed for algae cultivated in the two exhausted media (E+ and EG+, 1.29 and 1.18 div d^{-1}, respectively; control, 0.98 div d^{-1}; $p <0.01$ in both cases relative to C) (Fig 2b). Subsequently, from the 3rd day onwards, no relevant differences were observed between C and EG+ samples, as both of them showed similar growth kinetics and cell densities (Fig 2a). Conversely, E+ samples reached and maintained the highest cell density; the major difference as compared to the other samples was observed starting on the 7th day, with a cell density of about 16×10^6 cells mL^{-1} (45 and 50% more than EG+ and C samples, respectively; $p <0.01$ in both cases relative to E+ samples) at the same time point. After the 17th day, all samples entered the stationary phase, reaching, at the end of the experiment, a final cell density of 25-30 $\times 10^6$ cells mL^{-1}. During the experiments, aliquots of samples were periodically harvested to measure the pH of the culture media. As observed in Figure S1, initial pH was very different between control medium (about 7.0) and exhausted media (about 9.5 in both cases). pH gradually increased up to 9.2 in the control medium, whilst in E^+ and EG^+ media the pH varied between 9.5 and 8.0 without any obvious trend.

Consumption of nitrate and phosphate by N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control growth media*

The consumption of nitrate and phosphate by *N. oleoabundans* cells in the course of the experiment is depicted in Fig 3. At time 0 (inoculation), the exhausted replenished growth media contained approximately 2 mM NO_3^- and 0.115 mM PO_4^{2-}, i.e., the typical concentration of those components in BM medium. By the end of the experiment, cells had consumed practically all nitrate and phosphate present in the growth media. However, nutrient consumption by C, E+ and EG+ algal cultures followed different trends, since C samples maintained higher nitrate and phosphate concentrations than samples in exhausted media. In fact, after 12 days of cultivation, cells grown in E+ and EG+ had consumed about 34% and 68% of nitrate, respectively, while C only 15%. Nitrate concentration decreased from 1.43 mM at time 0 for all culture media to 0.94 mM for E+, 0.45 mM for EG+ and 1.21 mM for C media ($p < 0.001$ in both treated samples relative to C; Fig 3a). Differently, during the first 12 days of growth, phosphate exhibited a dramatic decrease, with a reduction by cells cultivated in EG+ and E+ of 94% and 98%, respectively, while in C medium it was only about 60%. In fact, phosphate concentration decreased from about 0.086 mM at time 0 for all culture media to 0.002 for E+, 0.005 for EG+ and 0.035 mM for C media ($p < 0.001$ in both treated samples relative to C; Fig 3b).

Photosynthetic pigment content in N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control media*

During the experiment a gradual increase in photosynthetic pigment content was observed in all samples (Fig 4). Chl*a* in algae grown in C medium showed an evident increase up to the end of the experiment, reaching an average concentration of 0.5 nmol 10^{-6} cells (Fig 4a). A similar increasing trend was also observed in E+ samples, though with values 10-15% lower than those of controls. From the 17th day of cultivation, Chl*a* content of E+ samples was significantly lower than in C (32%; $p<0.01$). Conversely, in EG+ samples Chl*a* content showed a slightly increasing trend as

compared with C and E+ samples; this led to a final value of 0.35 nmol 10^{-6} cells at the end of the experiment (32 and 21% lower than C and E+ samples, respectively; Fig 4a). An increasing trend in Chl*b* content was also observed for all samples, without significant differences between C and E+ samples (Fig 4b). Similar to Chl*a* content, EG+ cells contained lower quantities of Chl*b* than C and E+ samples (15-25% and 20-35% lower than C and E+ samples, respectively). More evident differences were observed for Car content (Fig 4c). In fact, C samples showed an evident increase up to the end of the experiment, always containing higher quantities compared to the other samples (20-45% and 15-30% more than E+ and EG+ samples, respectively; $p<0.05$). It is noteworthy that EG+ and E+ cells shared a similar trend of Car concentration during the experiment (Fig 4c).

Maximum quantum yield of PSII of N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control media*

The variations in PSII maximum quantum yield measured during the experiments are shown in Fig 5. C, E+ and EG+ samples showed a slight increase of the F_V/F_M ratio during the first three days of growth, reaching values of ca. 0.70. Subsequently, C cells maintained stable values around 0.70-0.75, while the F_V/F_M ratio of E+ and EG+ samples decreased drastically down to values below 0.50 at the end of experiment. In EG+ cells the decrease was dramatic already from the 3rd day of cultivation, reaching the lowest value after 17 days (ca. 0.30 for EG+ *vs* 0.75 for C and 0.50 for E+; $p<0.01$ in both cases); thereafter, samples maintained stable values of ca. 0.35 until the end of the experiment. On the contrary, in E+ cells, F_V/F_M started to decrease very strongly only from the 7th day of cultivation until the 17th day (from about 0.70 at day 7 down to 0.50 at day 17). During the subsequent experimental times (21th and 25th day), the F_V/F_M ratio of E+ cells remained stable around 0.45.

Morphological observations of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in exhausted and control media

Light microscopy and Nile Red staining

Light microscopy of both control and treated samples showed that *N. oleoabundans* maintained

similar cell morphology and dimensions throughout the experiment (Fig 6, 7). In fact, cells were almost spherical with a cell diameter of 3-5 μm. One cup-shaped chloroplast, containing a large pyrenoid, was present inside the cells (Fig 6a, c, e). Moreover, the chloroplast emitted an intense red fluorescence due to Chl (Fig 6b, d, f). Interestingly, after 25 days of cultivation, while cell size and shape remained substantially unchanged, all algal samples showed some translucent granulation at the cytoplasmic level (Fig 7a, c, e). In order to understand the nature of those granulations and to investigate if the recycled growth media could promote the production of lipid globules, all samples were periodically stained with the lipid-specific fluorochrome Nile Red. The reaction was positive only at the end of the experiment and the translucent globules were then unequivocally identified as lipid droplets (Fig 7b, d, f).

TEM observations

To investigate the morphological and cytological changes induced by cultivation in recycled growth media, the ultrastructure of C, E+ and EG+ samples was observed by TEM. At 12 days of cultivation, most of the C cell volume was occupied by a characteristic cup-shaped chloroplast. Inside the plastid one large pyrenoid, which was crossed by two elongated and appressed thylakoids, was present (Fig 8a). In particular, the organelle contained starch in the shape of a shell around the pyrenoid, and showed the typical thylakoid organization (Fig 8b). Typically featured chloroplasts, as described for cells grown in C, were observed in cells grown in E+ medium (Fig 8c); however, thylakoids were more appressed than in C (Fig 8d). EG+ samples showed a more strongly altered chloroplast structure (Fig 8e), as compared with C and E+ samples. Photosynthetic membranes showed different degrees of thylakoid appression: some portions of thylakoid membranes were appressed while others were loose and sometimes swollen (Fig 8f,g). In addition, large portions of the stroma were free of thylakoids and some plastoglobules in proximity of the thylakoid membranes were also visible (Fig 8g, h). Finally, in EG+ samples the pyrenoid lost its round shape and appeared malformed (Fig 8e).

Discussion

The recycling of culture medium has been proposed as a possible solution in order to reduce water consumption for algal cultivation, thereby making the process more economically feasible and environmentally sustainable (Yang et al. 2011; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2013; Farooq et al. 2014). Yang et al. (2011) estimated that the large-scale cultivation of the microalga *Chlorella vulgaris* in recycled culture medium could reduce water use by about 84%. Present results clearly suggest that *N. oleoabundans* can also efficiently grow in exhausted growth media, especially in the autotrophic medium replenished with nitrate and phosphate (E+). Observing the consumption trend of these main nutrients (Fig. 3), it is clear that in the exhausted media their concentration decreased faster with respect to controls in parallel to the enhanced cell growth. Moreover, phosphate was consumed faster than nitrate by all samples, probably because of its 100 times lower concentration with respect to the latter nutrient (0.2 gL^{-1} of nitrate *vs* 0.002 gL^{-1} of phosphate; Baldisserotto et al., 2012).Thus, in order to make the use of recycled culture medium feasible, exhausted media should be replenished with the correct ratio of nitrate and phosphate, as they are the main nutrients that guarantee cell growth (Stephens et al. 2010). This aspect was preliminarily verified by employing unmodified exhausted growth media (E and EG) to re-cultivate *N. oleoabundans*. In fact, cells showed a slight growth, reaching, at the end of the cultivation period, low cell densities (ca. 11 *vs* 32×10^6 cells mL^{-1} of C cultures) (data not shown). These cells accumulated intracellular lipids throughout the experiment (data not shown) as a consequence of the limitation of nitrate and phosphate (Mata et al. 2010; Popovich et al. 2012). These results are consistent with those of Zhu et al. (2013), who found that *C. zofingensis* cultivated in recycled medium, without nitrogen and phosphorus, displayed enhanced lipid production compared to cultures with full nutrients.

In order to understand if the growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in E+ and EG+, relative to C, was influenced by some molecules released from the algae, a characterization of

autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media was performed. First of all, pH of the control and exhausted media was monitored. In particular, an increasing trend was observed in control, which reached the pH of the exhausted media at the end of the experiment. This was not surprisingly, considering that during the microalgal growth pH usually increases because of the consumption of CO_2 during the photosynthetic process (Zhang et al., 2014). However, considering that in E^+ and EG^+ pH fluctuated around their initial values, or at least gradually decreased, it is not possible to attribute to pH any evident role in the cell growth promotion. Moheimani and Borowitzka (2006) and Stephen et al. (2010) reported that molecules released from cells can positively/negatively alter cell metabolism and biomass production.

Here we show that both exhausted media contained the main PAs (putrescine, spermidine, and spermine). It is known that these plant growth regulators are involved in a great variety of developmental processes in plant cells, e.g., cell division and protein synthesis (Kaur-Sawhney et al. 2003; Kuznetsova et al. 2006). PA biosynthetic pathways have also been studied in green algae (Cohen et al. 1984; Theiss et al. 2002; Fuell et al. 2010). Although algae produce "unusual" PAs, such as homospermidine and thermospermine (Hamana et al. 2013), the more common PAs (Put, Spd and Spm), when added to the media, promoted growth and metabolism in *C. vulgaris* (Czerpak et al. 2003). PAs are also known to alleviate the effect of biotic and abiotic stress in plants as well as algae (Tate et al. 2013).

In the present work, a very strong increase in Put and, especially, Spd concentrations was observed in *N. oleoabundans* mixotrophic cells as compared to the autotrophic ones, both cultivated in a 20-L PBR. The growth-promoting role of PAs could explain the faster (0-4 days) and stronger cell density increase (ca. 33 x 10^6 cell mL^{-1}) in mixotrophic cultures relative to the autotrophic ones (0-9 days; ca. 22 x 10^6 cell mL^{-1}). The higher PA concentrations in mixotrophically grown cells also suggest that, under these culture conditions, algal cells may be better protected from stress-inducing factors, e.g., bacterial contamination. To our knowledge, the presence of PAs released into algal growth medium in PBRs has not been documented before. The release of PAs (predominantly Spd)

from autotrophic and mixotrophic cells into their respective (E and EG) exhausted media was not significantly different. However, the presence of these plant growth regulators seems to contribute to the promotion of *N. oleoabundans* growth in both media replenished with nitrate and phosphate. In fact, during the entire experiment, a higher cell density was observed in E+ relative to C medium. Moreover, the EG+ samples showed a promotion of cell density, albeit similar to that of C.

Both autotrophic and mixotrophic exhausted media also contained FFAs, which could have induced a change in the normal metabolism of *N. oleoabundans*. This assumption is demonstrated by the more rapid consumption of nitrate and phosphate, the decreased photosynthetic pigments content and the strong decline in the F_V/F_M ratio observed in cells grown in E+ and EG+ media. These results corroborate the assumption that microalgae release metabolites in high cell density cultures (Richmond 2004) or as a consequence of stressful conditions (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006). Even if the role of FFAs is currently under debate (Ikawa 2004; Stephen et al. 2010), recent studies showed that they can strongly inhibit growth or exert cytotoxic effects on microalgae (Kogteva and Bezuglov 1998; Wu et al. 2006; Bosma et al. 2008; Stephen et al. 2010). In fact, the presence of these metabolites, and their oxidative products, negatively affect biomass productivity, especially when the microalgae are cultivated in recycled medium (Lívanský et al. 1996; Rodolfi et al. 2003). Granum et al. (2002) reported that the accumulation of intracellular lipids in microalgae enhanced the release of FFAs into the culture medium, and Harun et al. (2010) observed that this release was caused by cell lysis.

In this work, FFA composition in autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media after *N. oleoabundans* cultivation was similar. The only main difference was represented by the presence of the monoenoic oleic acid (C18:1ω9) in EG medium. Oleic acid is one of the major lipid components in lipid-enriched *N. oleoabundans* grown under N-stress conditions (Popovich et al. 2012). It is reported that mixotrophic cultivation alters N:C ratio, inducing similar lipid production as N-depleted autotrophic cultures (Giovanardi et al. 2014). Probably for this reason, the release of oleic acid occurred only in the mixotrophic growth medium. Moreover, Wu et al. (2006) observed

altered plasma membrane permeability due to the toxic effects of FFAs in two *Chlorophyta* (*C. vulgaris* and *Monoraphidium contortum*) and in a cyanobacterium (*Anabaena* P-9). Then, in addition to the lower concentration with respect to nitrate in BM medium, the rapid consumption of phosphate in both exhausted media could be linked also to an alteration in membrane permeability, due to the activity of FFAs (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006). In addition, FFAs can cause inhibition of the PSII and PSI electron transport chains (Siegenthaler 1973) and disorganization of thylakoids (Wu et al. 2006). Indeed, *N. oleoabundans* cells in E+ and EG+ were characterized by alterations of the photosynthetic apparatus. These cells, in fact, contained less photosynthetic pigments than C cells, and exhibited a drastic decrease of the PSII maximum quantum yield (F_V/F_M). These variations are linked to an alteration of photosynthetic efficiency, especially as regards PSII (White et al. 2011). The decreased photosynthetic pigment contents, observed in cells grown in E+ and EG+, also reflected the changes in thylakoid membrane arrangement (Baldisserotto et al. 2012). Therefore, correct thylakoid organization is necessary to maintain optimal photosynthetic activity and this is often influenced by culture conditions (Nevo et al. 2012). In addition, the presence of some plastoglobules in chloroplasts of algal cells, grown on exhausted media, could be another indicator of an alteration of photosynthetic membranes (Besagni and Kessler 2013). On the contrary, *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in C medium showed stable and normal F_V/F_M values throughout the experiment (Giovanardi et al. 2014), and the typical assembly of thylakoid membranes (Nevo et al. 2012; Baldisserotto et al. 2012; Giovanardi et al. 2014).

The presence of lipid droplets, observed only at the end of the experiment in C, E+ and EG+ cells, is probably related to aging of the microalgal cultures (Hu et al. 2008; Baldisserotto et al. 2012), rather than to the use of recycled culture media.

In conclusion, results presented here demonstrate that recycling autotrophic and mixotrophic growth media is a suitable solution to obtain high cell density cultures of the microalga *N. oleoabundans*. For this reason, they represent a contribution for improving the scale-up of

microalgal cultivation while providing a more sustainable ecological impact on water resources. However, further studies are needed to deepen knowledge on the nature and the specific role of some molecules that are released into the growth media, in order to obtain useful information for the advancement of the biotechnological use of this strain.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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Figure captions:

Fig 1 (**a-e)** Growth kinetics (**a**) and morphology (**b-e**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells autotrophically cultivated in a 20-L PBR in BM medium. Light (**b, d**) and fluorescence microscope observations (**c, e**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 3 (**b, c**) and 25 (**d, e**) days of autotrophic cultivation. (**f-j**) Growth kinetics (**f**) and cell morphology (**g-j**) of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in a 20-L PBR in BM medium under mixotrophic conditions (supplemented with 2.5 gL^{-1} of glucose). Light (**g, i**) and fluorescence microscope observations (**h, j**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 3 (**g, h**) and 8 (**d, e**) days of mixotrophic cultivation. In both graphs, curves are constructed on a $\log_2$ scale and data are means ± s.d. (n=3). In all micrographs, bars: 2 μm

Fig 2 (a) Growth kinetics of *N. oleoabundans* in BM medium (filled circles), E+ medium (empty squares) and EG+ medium (empty diamonds). (**b)** Growth rates, calculated during the exponential phase (0–3 days time interval of cultivation), of cells grown in BM (white), E+ (light grey) and EG+ (dark grey) media. The growth curve is constructed on a $\log_2$ scale and data are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 3 Time-course variations in the concentrations of nitrate (**a**) and of phosphate (**b**) in culture media of *N. oleoabundans* during 25 days of cultivation on BM medium (white), E+ medium (light grey) and EG+ medium (dark grey). Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 4 Time-course variations of Chl*a* (**a**), Chl*b* (**b**) and Car content (**c**) in *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in BM (filled circles), E+ (empty squares) and EG+ (empty diamonds) media during the 25 days of cultivation. Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 5 Time-course variations of PSII maximum quantum yield (F_V/F_M ratio) in *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in BM (filled circles), E+ (empty squares) and EG+ (empty diamonds) media during the 25 days of cultivation. Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 6 Light and fluorescence microscopy observations of *N. oleoabundans* cells at 12 days of cultivation. (**a)** Control cells and **(b**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast; (**c)** cell grown in E+ medium and (**d**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast; (**e)** cell grown in EG+ medium and (**f**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast. In all micrographs, bars: 2 μm

Fig 7 Light and epifluorescence pictures of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 25 days of growth. (**a)** Control cells and (**b**) relative Nile Red-staining observation, (**c**) cells grown in E+ medium and (**d**) relative Nile Red-staining observation, and (**e)** cells grown in E+ medium and (**f**) relative Nile Red-staining observation in EG+ medium. Translucent globules are indicated with arrows. In all micrographs, bars: 2 μm

Fig **8** Transmission electron micrographs of *N. oleoabundans* cells at 12 days of cultivation. (**a**) Cell grown in BM medium and (**b**) detail of its chloroplast showing the typical thylakoid membranes organization (white arrow). (**c**) Cell grown in E+ medium and (**d**) detail of its chloroplast with quite compact and appressed (white arrow) thylakoids. (**e**) Cell grown in EG+ medium and (**f-h**) details of its chloroplast. The presence of intermediate stages of thylakoid membranes are evident in EG+ cells, showing a general disorganisation of thylakoid membranes (**f-h**), which appeared wavy, loose and sometimes swollen (**f, g**). (**h**) Some plastoglobules in proximity of thylakoid membranes are also observed (arrowheads). P, pyrenoid; N, nucleus, M, mithochondrion. Bars: 0.5 μm (a, c, e); 0.05 μm (b, d, f, g, h)

Fig **9** Polyamine concentrations **(a)** in *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated in a 20-L PBR autotrophically and mixotrophically at 15 and 8 days of cultivation, respectively, and (**b)** in the corresponding exhausted E and EG growth media. Autotrophic cells (white), mixotrophic cells (dark), E+ (light grey) and EG+ medium (dark grey). Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Re-cultivation of *Neochloris oleoabundans* in exhausted autotrophic and mixotrophic media: the potential role of polyamines and free fatty acids

Alessandra Sabia[1], Costanza Baldisserotto[1], Stefania Biondi[2], Roberta Marchesini[1], Paola Tedeschi[3], Annalisa Maietti[3], Martina Giovanardi[1], Lorenzo Ferroni[1], Simonetta Pancaldi[1]

[1]Department of Life Sciences and Biotechnology, University of Ferrara, Corso Ercole I d'Este 32, 44121 Ferrara, Italy.

[2]Department of Biological, Geological and Environmental Sciences, University of Bologna, via Irnerio 42, 40126 Bologna, Italy.

[3]Department of Chemical and Pharmaceutical Science, University of Ferrara, via Fossato di Mortara 17, 44121 Ferrara, Italy.

*Corresponding Author. Tel: +39 0532 293786; Fax: +39 0532 208561; E-mail address: simonetta.pancaldi@unife.it.

ABSTRACT

Neochloris oleoabundans (Chlorophyta) is widely considered one of the most promising microalgae for biotechnological applications. However, the large-scale production of microalgae requires large amounts of water. In this perspective, the possibility of using exhausted growth media for the re-cultivation of *N. oleoabundans* was investigated in order to simultaneously make the cultivation more economically feasible and environmentally sustainable. Experiments were performed by testing the following media: autotrophic exhausted medium (E+) and mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose (EG+) of *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in a 20-L

photobioreactor (PBR). Both exhausted media were replenished with the same amounts of nitrate and phosphate as the control brackish medium (C). Growth kinetics, nitrate and phosphate consumption, photosynthetic pigments content, photosynthetic efficiency, cell morphology, and lipid production were evaluated. Moreover, the free fatty acid (FFA) composition of exhausted media and the polyamine (PA) concentrations of both algae and media were analyzed in order to test if some molecules, released into the medium, could influence algal growth and metabolism. Results showed that *N. oleoabundans* can efficiently grow in both exhausted media (E+ and EG+), especially in E+, and to the same extent as in C medium. Growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* was attributed to PAs and alteration of the photosynthetic apparatus to FFAs. Taken together, results show that recycling growth medium is a suitable solution to obtain good *N. oleoabundans* biomass concentrations, while providing a more sustainable ecological impact on water resources.

Keywords:

Neochloris oleoabundans

Recycling culture media

Photosynthetic apparatus

Biomass production

Polyamines

Free fatty acids

Introduction

Over the last decades, microalgae have received much attention as promising high-potential feedstock for biodiesel (Chisti 2007; Li et al. 2008; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013) and as an attractive raw material for the production of a wide range of high value bioproducts (Molina Grima et al. 2003; Mata et al. 2010). They are photosynthetic microorganisms with numerous key features, which potentially make them a more appreciable renewable source than terrestrial plants (Richmond 2004; Hu et al 2008; Ndimba et al. 2013). For instance, these microorganisms have faster growth rates, higher photosynthetic efficiencies, higher rates of carbon dioxide fixation, and higher biomass productivities compared to plants (Richmond 2004; Gouveia et al. 2009; Harun et al. 2010; Mata et al. 2010). Moreover, microalgae can thrive in non-arable lands being able to grow in waters having different salinity levels and chemical composition (Smith et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013).

The environmental and economical impact of large-scale production of microalgae has been widely discussed, with the aim of making the process increasingly sustainable (Sheehan 2009; Solomon 2010). In this perspective, microalgal cultivation systems are crucial factors to be taken into account (Smith et al. 2010; Stephens et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013). A wide variety of systems has been described by Mata and co-workers (2010) and recently by Borowitzka and Moheimani (2013). Microalgae can be cultivated in open pond reactors or closed photobioreactors (PBRs), depending on algal strain, issue of research, type of desired products and environmental conditions (Chisti 2007; Mata et al. 2010; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013). Although open ponds are the most commonly used culture systems, due to their low cost of production and operation, recently closed PBRs are receiving much attention for the possibility of producing valuable compounds (Pulz 2001; Grobbelaar 2009; Smith et al. 2010). However, algal cultures require large amounts of water in both culture systems (Lam and Lee 2012; Borowitzka and Moheimani 2013). Considering that water is becoming a scarce natural resource, water demand represents an important

factor when performing large-scale cultivation (Batan et al. 2013; Farooq et al. 2014). In order to reduce the high production costs and, at the same time, to make microalgal production more environmentally sustainable, recycling culture medium has been proposed as a possible solution (Yang et al. 2011; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2012; Farooq et al. 2014), especially in large-scale culture systems (Borowitzka 2005; Lam and Lee 2012; Zhu et al. 2013). However, the feasibility of recycling growth medium to re-cultivate microalgae has been tested only in a few cases (Lívanský et al. 1996; Rodolfi et al. 2003; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2013; Zhu et al. 2013). It is reported that the recycling medium could have negative effects on biomass productivity, due to the release of inhibitory secondary metabolites (Richmond 2004). Harmful metabolites are, in fact, released during microalgal growth under physiological stress (Ikawa 2004; Moheimani and Borowitzka 2006). Free fatty acids (FFAs), and substances derived from the photooxidation of unsaturated fatty acids, are the most common metabolites with inhibitory effects on microalgae (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006; Bosma et al. 2008; Stephen et al. 2010).

In the present work, the suitability of recycling growth media for the re-cultivation of *Neochloris oleoabundans* (Chlorophyta) was investigated. This species was chosen because it is considered one of the most promising oil-rich microalgae, due to its capability to accumulate lipids when grown under nitrogen starvation (Tornabene et al. 1983; Chisti 2007; Li et al. 2008; Pruvost et al. 2009) or mixotrophically, in the presence of glucose, or carbon-rich wastes, as organic carbon sources (Giovanardi et al. 2013; Baldisserotto et al. 2014). Present results clearly indicate that *N. oleoabundans* can efficiently grow in its exhausted growth medium, if suitably replenished with the main nutrients. Based on this encouraging result, and with the aim of gaining further knowledge on the morpho-physiological aspects and biotechnological applications of this algal strain, the following features were analyzed: (1) growth kinetics in parallel to nitrate and phosphate consumption; (2) photosynthetic pigment content; (3) PSII maximum quantum yield; (4) cell morphology, with special attention to intracellular lipid accumulation, (5) FFA accumulation in recycled growth media, and (6) polyamine (PA) concentration both inside cells and in the

corresponding culture media. PAs were determined in order to understand if these plant growth regulators could be responsible for the growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* in recycled growth medium. It is known, in fact, that PAs, together with other plant growth regulators, have stimulatory effects on algal growth and metabolism, and are involved in mitigating various types of biotic and abiotic stress (Tate et al. 2013).

Materials and Methods

Algal strains and culture condition

The strain used in this study was the Chlorophyta *N. oleoabundans* UTEX 1185 (syn. *Ettlia oleoabundans*) (Sphaeropleales, Neochloridaceae), obtained from the Culture Collection of Algae of the University of Texas (UTEX, Austin, Texas, USA; www.utex.org).

N. oleoabundans was cultivated in axenic liquid brackish medium (BM) (Baldisserotto et al. 2012) in a coaxial 20-L capacity PBR (M2M Engineering, Grazzanise, Caserta, Italy). Algae were cultivated autotrophically in BM for 25 days or mixotrophically, by addition of 2.5 g L^{-1} glucose, for 8 days, according to previously described protocols (Baldisserotto et al. 2014; Giovanardi et al. 2014). For autotrophic cultivation, cells were inoculated into the PBR to obtain an initial cell density of about 0.6 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}, while for mixotrophic cultivation initial cell density was higher (10 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}). Culture conditions in the PBR were: 24 ± 1°C; sterile air injection at the bottom of the PBR, with 0.5/3.5 h bubbling/static cycles; irradiance 65 $\mu mol_{photons}$ m^{-2} s^{-1} of PAR (16:8 h light:dark photoperiod). Light was supplied with inner cool–white fluorescent Philips tubes.

Algal growth and morphology in the PBR were monitored as described below.

Preparation of growth media

Experiments were performed by testing the following media:

- C: freshly prepared BM medium (control);

- E: autotrophic exhausted medium;

- EG: mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose;

- E+: autotrophic exhausted medium replenished with nitrate and phosphate concentrations as for BM medium;

- EG+: mixotrophic exhausted medium after cultivation with glucose and replenished with nutrients as in E+.

In order to obtain the exhausted media for the recycling experiment, *N. oleoabundans* was grown inside the PBR under the culture conditions described in the previous section. For E+ medium preparation, about 500 mL of autotrophic algal culture in the stationary phase of growth (at the 15^{th} day of cultivation in the PBR) were centrifuged at 2,000 *g* for 10 min in order to separate the medium from the algae, thus obtaining an autotrophic exhausted medium (E). The medium appeared pale-yellow and was free from algae, bacteria and protozoa; its optical density at a wavelength of 750 nm (OD_{750}) was 0.02. For EG+ medium, at the 8^{th} day of cultivation in the PBR, the same aliquots of algal culture were harvested by centrifugation (2,000 *g* for 10 min). In this case, the mixotrophic exhausted medium (EG) was straw-yellow in colour and presented a weak bacterial contamination due to the glucose addition (OD_{750} =0.009). After determining the nitrate and phosphate concentrations of the two exhausted media (see "Nitrate and phosphate analyses"), KNO_3 and K_2HPO_4 were axenically added to reach final concentrations of 0.2 and 0.02 g L^{-1}, respectively, i.e., the typical concentration of those components in BM, thus obtaining the replenished exhausted media (E+ and EG+) used for experiments.

Experimental design

When autotrophic cultures of *N. oleoabundans,* grown in BM in the PBR, reached a cell density of 10 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1} (after about 9 days of cultivation), aliquots of cells were inoculated into 300-mL Erlenmeyer flasks (150 mL total volume) containing C, E+, EG+ media, to obtain an initial cell density of about 0.5 x 10^6 cells mL^{-1}. The cultures were placed in a growth chamber (24 ± 1 °C, 80 $\mu mol_{photons}$ m^{-2} s^{-1} of PAR with a 16:8 h light-darkness photoperiod), and cultivated with continuous shaking at 80 rpm, without external CO_2 supply. Experiments were performed in triplicate. Aliquots of cultures (cells and media) were collected at different times of cultivation up to 25 days, depending on the analysis.

Analyses

Growth evaluation

Aliquots of cell samples cultivated in control and exhausted media were counted at 0, 3, 7, 12, 17 and 25 days of cultivation using a Thoma haemocytometer (HBG, Giessen, Germany) under a light microscope (Zeiss, model Axiophot) and growth curves were obtained.

The growth rate (μ, number of divisions per day) during the exponential phase was calculated with the following equation:

$$\mu \text{ (div } d^{-1}) = (\log_2 N_1 - \log_2 N_0) / (t_1 - t_0),$$

where μ is the growth rate, N_1 the cell number at time t_1, N_0 the cell number at time 0 and $t_1 - t_0$ the time interval (days) (Giovanardi et al. 2013).

Nitrate and phosphate analyses

After 12 and 25 days of cultivation, samples of C, E+ and EG+ media were harvested by centrifugation to analyze nitrate and phosphate concentrations. These nutrients were quantified colorimetrically using a flow-injection autoanalyzer (FlowSys, Systea, Roma, Italy).

Photosynthetic pigment extraction and quantification

For photosynthetic pigment analysis, cell samples were collected by centrifugation after 0, 7, 17, 21 and 25 days of cultivation. Extraction of photosynthetic pigments was performed according to Baldisserotto et al. (2014). The extracts were measured with a Pharmacia Ultrospec 2000 UV-Vis spectrophotometer (1-nm bandwidth; Amersham Biosciences, Piscataway, NJ, USA) at 666 (chlorophyll *a* - Chl*a*), 653 (chlorophyll *b* - Chl*b*) and 470 nm (carotenoids - Car). Quantification was performed according to equations reported in Wellburn (1994).

PAM fluorimetry

The PSII maximum quantum yield of algae was determined at the same cultivation times considered for growth kinetics measurements. A pulse amplitude modulated fluorometer (ADC Bioscientific Ltd, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, UK) was used to determine the *in vivo* chlorophyll fluorescence of PSII. The PSII maximum quantum yield is reported as F_V/F_M ratio, *i.e.* $(F_M - F_0)/F_M$, where variable fluorescence is $F_V = (F_M - F_0)$, F_M is the maximum fluorescence and F_0 is the initial fluorescence of samples (Lichtenthaler et al. 2005). This measurement is considered a valid method to probe the maximum quantum yield of photochemistry in PSII (Kalaji et al. 2014). Moreover, it is useful to estimate the physiological state of plants and microorganisms also under nutrient stress (White et al. 2011). Samples were prepared as reported in Ferroni et al. (2011) after 15 min of dark incubation.

Light and fluorescence microscopy

For microscopic observations, cell samples were routinely collected throughout the cultivation period inside the PBR and during the experiment with exhausted media. Aliquots of samples were observed using a microscope (Zeiss, model Axiophot) with conventional and fluorescent attachments. The light source for chlorophyll fluorescence observation was a HBO 100 W pressure

mercury vapour lamp (filter set, BP436/10, LP470). Pictures of cells were taken with a Canon IXUS 110 IS digital camera (12.1 megapixels), mounted on the ocular lens through a Leica DC150 system (Leica Camera AG, Solms, Germany).

Lipid staining

During experiments, the intracellular presence of lipids was evaluated by staining cells with the fluorochrome Nile Red (9-diethylamina-5Hbenzo[α]phenoxazine-5-one, 0.5 mg dissolved in 100 mL acetone; Sigma-Aldrich, Gallarate, Milan, Italy), as described in Giovanardi et al. (2014). After incubation at 37°C in darkness for 15 min, cells were observed with the microscope described above at an excitation wavelength of 485 nm (filter set, BP485, LP520). Photographs were taken with the camera described above.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM)

TEM observations were made on cells harvested by centrifugation (600 *g*, 10 min) at the 12th day of cultivation. Cells were fixed, post-fixed and dehydrated as reported in Baldisserotto et al. (2012). Embedding in resin and staining procedures were performed as previously described (Pancaldi et al. 2002). Sections were observed with a Hitachi H800 electron microscope (Hitachi, Tokyo, Japan) at the Electron Microscopy Centre, University of Ferrara.

Extracellular free fatty acids analysis

To analyze the FFA composition of the exhausted E and EG media used to prepare E+ and EG+ replenished media, aliquots of *N. oleoabundans* cultures grown autotrophically and mixotrophically in the PBR were collected at the 15th and at the 8th day of cultivation, respectively. Samples were centrifuged at 2,000 *g* for 10 min in order to separate the medium from algae. Fifty mL of media obtained from the autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) cultures were freeze-dried for analysis. The extracellular FFA composition was determined in duplicate by gas chromatography-mass

spectrometry (GC-MS). For extraction, samples were dissolved in 3 mL of hexane, sonicated for 15 min and extracted overnight. Fatty acid methyl esters were prepared by transesterification with 1.5 mL of 5% of sodium hydroxide in methanol solution. Sample volumes of 1 µl were injected into the GC-MS apparatus, which consisted of a Varian Saturn 2100 MS/MS ion trap mass spectrometer. Separations were performed using a Zebron ZB-WAX Phenomenex capillary column (60 cm in length, 0.25 mm i.d) supplied with helium carrier gas at 1 mL min^{-1} constant flow. The injector temperature was 250 °C and the oven temperature programme was the following: start 100°C for 2 min, ramp to 200°C at 10 °C/min, and hold for 108 min. The MS acquisitions were performed by full scan mode.

Determination of polyamines

To analyze the free PA composition of *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in PBR and in the corresponding E and EG media, samples were collected as described for FFA analyses. Freeze-dried E or EG media and algae (50 and 20 mg, respectively) were extracted in cold 4% perchloric acid, kept for 1 h on ice, and then centrifuged at 15,000 *g* for 15 min. Aliquots (200 µL) of the supernatants and standard solutions of putrescine (Put), spermidine (Spd) and spermine (Spm) were derivatised with dansyl chloride (Scaramagli et al. 1999). Dansylated derivatives were extracted with toluene, taken to dryness and resuspended in acetonitrile. PAs were separated and quantified by HPLC using a reverse phase C_{18} column (Spherisorb ODS2, 5-µm particle diameter, 4.6 x 250 mm, Waters, Wexford, Ireland) and a programmed acetonitrile:water step gradient (flow rate 1 mL min^{-1}) on a Jasco system (Jasco Corp., Tokyo, Japan) consisting of a PU-1580 pump, an LG-1580-02 ternary gradient unit, a DG-1580-53 three-line degasser and a FP-1529 fluorescence detector, linked to an autosampler (AS 2055 Plus).

Data treatment

Data were processed with Graphpad Prism 6 (Graph Pad Software, San Diego CA, USA). In each case, means ± standard deviations for *n* number of samples are given. Statistical analyses for comparison of means were carried out using ANOVA, followed by Student's *t*-test (significance level, 0.05).

Results

Growth and morphology of N. oleoabundans *cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in a 20-L PBR*

Growth kinetics and cell morphology of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated autotrophically and mixotrophically in a 20-L PBR are shown in Fig 1. Autotrophic cells rapidly entered the exponential phase starting on the 2^{nd}-3^{rd} day up to the 7^{th}-9^{th} day of cultivation (Fig 1a). After this period, cultures had a short late exponential phase and then entered the stationary phase of growth, reaching a final cell density of about 22×10^6 cells mL^{-1} at the end of the of cultivation time (25 days). During the entire period, cells showed the typical morphology of *N. oleoabundans* grown in BM medium, i.e., almost spherical, with a cell diameter of 3-5 µm (Fig 1b, d). One cup-shaped chloroplast, containing a large pyrenoid, was present and emitted an intense red fluorescence due to the presence of chlorophyll (Fig 1b,c). On the 25^{th} day of cultivation, cells maintained their normal features and dimensions, but some lipid globules accumulated inside the cytoplasm, as revealed by Nile Red staining (Fig 1d,e).

During the first four days of mixotrophic growth in the PBR in the presence of glucose, cells showed an evident increase in cell density, reaching values of ca. 33×10^6 cells mL^{-1} (Fig 1f). Subsequently, cells entered the stationary phase of growth, and then cell density leveled off to values of about 36×10^6 cells mL^{-1} up to the end of the cultivation period, i.e., eight days. At the

beginning of cultivation, both cell shape and size, and chloroplast features in mixotrophic cultures (Fig 1g, h) were similar to those of autotrophic cultures (Fig 1b, c). Starting on the 3rd day and up to the end of cultivation, however, mixotrophic cells showed peculiar features. In fact, the chloroplast lost its characteristic cup shape and translucent globules, which tended to occupy almost the entire cell volume, accumulated inside the cytoplasm (Fig 1i). Nile Red staining confirmed the lipidic nature of these droplets (Fig 1j).

Growth kinetics of N. oleoabundans *in exhausted and control growth media*

As shown in Fig 2a, the growth of *N. oleoabundans* in E+ medium was promoted for the entire experiment relative to controls grown on BM medium; on the contrary, growth in EG+ medium was similar to that of the C. All samples entered the exponential phase very soon (during the first 3 days of cultivation), despite some differences in growth rates (Fig 2b). The highest μ values were observed for algae cultivated in the two exhausted media (E+ and EG+, 1.29 and 1.18 div d^{-1}, respectively; control, 0.98 div d^{-1}; $p < 0.01$ in both cases relative to C) (Fig 2b). Subsequently, from the 3rd day onwards, no relevant differences were observed between C and EG+ samples, as both of them showed similar growth kinetics and cell densities (Fig 2a). Conversely, E+ samples reached and maintained the highest cell density; the major difference as compared to the other samples was observed starting on the 7th day, with a cell density of about 16×10^6 cells mL^{-1} (45 and 50% more than EG+ and C samples, respectively; $p < 0.01$ in both cases relative to E+ samples) at the same time point. After the 17th day, all samples entered the stationary phase, reaching, at the end of the experiment, a final cell density of $25\text{-}30 \times 10^6$ cells mL^{-1}.

Consumption of nitrate and phosphate by N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control growth media*

The consumption of nitrate and phosphate by *N. oleoabundans* cells in the course of the experiment is depicted in Fig 3. At time 0 (inoculation), the exhausted replenished growth media contained

approximately 2 mM NO_3^- and 0.115 mM PO_4^{2-}, i.e., the typical concentration of those components in BM medium. By the end of the experiment, cells had consumed practically all nitrate and phosphate present in the growth media. However, nutrient consumption by C, E+ and EG+ algal cultures followed different trends, since C samples maintained higher nitrate and phosphate concentrations than samples in exhausted media. In fact, after 12 days of cultivation, cells grown in E+ and EG+ had consumed about 34% and 68% of nitrate, respectively, while C only 15%. Nitrate concentration, decreased from 1.43 mM at time 0 for all culture media to 0.94 mM for E+, 0.45 mM for EG+ and 1.21 mM for C media ($p < 0.001$ in both treated samples relative to C; Fig 3a). Differently, during the first 12 days of growth, phosphate exhibited a dramatic decrease, with a reduction by cells cultivated in EG+ and E+ of 94% and 98%, respectively, while in C medium it was only about 60%. In fact, phosphate concentration decreased from about 0.086 mM at time 0 for all culture media to 0.002 for E+, 0.005 for EG+ and 0.035 mM for C media ($p < 0.001$ in both treated samples relative to C; Fig 3b).

Photosynthetic pigment content in N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control media*

During the experiment a gradual increase in photosynthetic pigment content was observed in all samples (Fig 4). Chl*a* in algae grown in C medium showed an evident increase up to the end of the experiment, reaching an average concentration of 0.5 nmol 10^{-6} cells (Fig 4a). A similar increasing trend was also observed in E+ samples, though with values 10-15% lower than those of controls. From the 17th day of cultivation, Chl*a* content of E+ samples was significantly lower than in C (32%; $p<0.01$). Conversely, in EG+ samples Chl*a* content showed a slightly increasing trend as compared with C and E+ samples; this led to a final value of 0.35 nmol 10^{-6} cells at the end of the experiment (32 and 21% lower than C and E+ samples, respectively; Fig 4a). An increasing trend in Chl*b* content was also observed for all samples, without significant differences between C and E+ samples (Fig 4b). Similar to Chl*a* content, EG+ cells contained lower quantities of Chl*b* than C and E+ samples (15-25% and 20-35% lower than C and E+ samples, respectively). More evident

differences were observed for Car content (Fig 4c). In fact, C samples showed an evident increase up to the end of the experiment, always containing higher quantities compared to the other samples (20-45% and 15-30% more than E+ and EG+ samples, respectively; $p<0.05$). It is noteworthy that EG+ and E+ cells shared a similar trend of Car concentration during the experiment (Fig 4c).

Maximum quantum yield of PSII of N. oleoabundans *cultivated in exhausted and control media*

The variations in PSII maximum quantum yield measured during the experiments are shown in Fig 5. C, E+ and EG+ samples showed a slight increase of the F_V/F_M ratio during the first three days of growth, reaching values of ca. 0.70. Subsequently, C cells maintained stable values around 0.70-0.75, while the F_V/F_M ratio of E+ and EG+ samples decreased drastically down to values below 0.50 at the end of experiment. In EG+ cells the decrease was dramatic already from the 3rd day of cultivation, reaching the lowest value after 17 days (ca. 0.30 for EG+ *vs* 0.75 for C and 0.50 for E+; $p <0.01$ in both cases); thereafter, samples maintained stable values of ca. 0.35 until the end of the experiment. On the contrary, in E+ cells, F_V/F_M started to decrease very strongly only from the 7th day of cultivation until the 17th day (from about 0.70 at day 7 down to 0.50 at day 17). During the subsequent experimental times (21th and 25th day), the F_V/F_M ratio of E+ cells remained stable around 0.45.

Morphological observations of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in exhausted and control media

Light microscopy and Nile Red staining

Light microscopy of both control and treated samples showed that *N. oleoabundans* maintained similar cell morphology and dimensions throughout the experiment (Fig 6, 7). In fact, cells were almost spherical with a cell diameter of 3-5 μm. One cup-shaped chloroplast, containing a large pyrenoid, was present inside the cells (Fig 6a, c, e). Moreover, the chloroplast emitted an intense

red fluorescence due to Chl (Fig 6b, d, f). Interestingly, after 25 days of cultivation, while cell size and shape remained substantially unchanged, all algal samples showed some translucent granulation at the cytoplasmic level (Fig 7a, c, e). In order to understand the nature of those granulations and to investigate if the recycled growth media could promote the production of lipid globules, all samples were periodically stained with the lipid-specific fluorochrome Nile Red. The reaction was positive only at the end of the experiment and the translucent globules were then unequivocally identified as lipid droplets (Fig 7b, d, f).

TEM observations

To investigate the morphological and cytological changes induced by cultivation in recycled growth media, the ultrastructure of C, E+ and EG+ samples was observed by TEM. At 12 days of cultivation, most of the C cell volume was occupied by a characteristic cup-shaped chloroplast. Inside the plastid one large pyrenoid, which was crossed by two elongated and appressed thylakoids, was present (Fig 8a). In particular, the organelle contained starch in the shape of a shell around the pyrenoid, and showed the typical thylakoid organization (Fig 8b). Typically featured chloroplasts, as described for cells grown in C, were observed in cells grown in E+ medium (Fig 8c); however, thylakoids were more appressed than in C (Fig 8d). EG+ samples showed a more strongly altered chloroplast structure (Fig 8e), as compared with C and E+ samples. Photosynthetic membranes showed different degrees of thylakoid appression: some portions of thylakoid membranes were appressed while others were loose and sometimes swollen (Fig 8f,g). In addition, large portions of the stroma were free of thylakoids and some plastoglobules in proximity of the thylakoid membranes were also visible (Fig 8g, h). Finally, in EG+ samples the pyrenoid lost its round shape and appeared malformed (Fig 8e).

Extracellular FFA composition in E and EG media

The extracellular FFA composition in the exhausted autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media of *N. oleoabundans* is shown in Table 1. While EG medium comprised both saturated and mono-unsaturated FFAs, E medium contained only saturated FFAs. In fact, both samples contained similar percentages of saturated myristic acid (C14:0) and palmitic acid (C16:0), while the percentage of stearic acid (C18:0) was different between the two samples. In E medium, stearic acid was present at about 64%, while in EG medium at about 56%; however, C18:0 represented the main saturated FFA for both samples. It is noteworthy that only EG medium contained about 6% of the monoenoic oleic acid (C18:1ω9).

Polyamine content in E and EG media and in the corresponding N. oleoabundans *cells cultivated in a 20-L PBR*

As shown in Fig 9a, the PA composition of *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated mixotrophically in the PBR were characterized by higher putrescine, spermine, and, especially, spermidine levels compared to cells cultivated autotrophically. In fact, Spm, Put and Spd concentrations in mixotrophic cells were *ca*. 2, 30 and 57 times higher, respectively, than those found in autotrophic cells ($p<0.001$). Conversely, the PA composition in E and EG medium was not significantly different. In fact, both media contained similar amounts of Put and Spm. Interestingly, spermidine was present in high concentration in both media (119 ± 16.91 and 101 ± 5.00 pmol mL^{-1} in E and EG, respectively; Fig 9b).

Discussion

The recycling of culture medium has been proposed as a possible solution in order to reduce water consumption for algal cultivation, thereby making the process more economically feasible and environmentally sustainable (Yang et al. 2011; Hadj-Romdhane et al. 2013; Farooq et al. 2014).

Yang et al. (2011) estimated that the large-scale cultivation of the microalga *Chlorella vulgaris* in recycled culture medium could reduce water use by about 84%. Present results clearly suggest that *N. oleoabundans* can also efficiently grow in exhausted growth media, especially in the autotrophic medium replenished with nitrate and phosphate (E+). Thus, in order to make the use of recycled culture medium feasible, exhausted media should be replenished with the correct ratio of nitrate and phosphate, as they are the main nutrients that guarantee cell growth (Stephens et al. 2010). This aspect was preliminarily verified by employing unmodified exhausted growth media (E and EG) to re-cultivate *N. oleoabundans*. In fact, cells showed a slight growth, reaching, at the end of the cultivation period, low cell densities (ca. 11 *vs* 32×10^6 cells mL^{-1} of C cultures) (data not shown). These cells accumulated intracellular lipids throughout the experiment (data not shown) as a consequence of the limitation of nitrate and phosphate (Mata et al. 2010; Popovich et al. 2012). These results are consistent with those of Zhu et al. (2013), who found that *C. zofingensis* cultivated in recycled medium, without nitrogen and phosphorus, displayed enhanced lipid production compared to cultures with full nutrients.

In order to understand if the growth promotion of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in E+ and EG+, relative to C, was influenced by some molecules released from the algae, a characterization of autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media was performed. In fact, Moheimani and Borowitzka (2006) and Stephen et al. (2010) reported that molecules released from cells can positively/negatively alter cell metabolism and biomass production.

Here we show that both exhausted media contained the main PAs (putrescine, spermidine, and spermine). It is known that these plant growth regulators are involved in a great variety of developmental processes in plant cells, e.g., cell division and protein synthesis (Kaur-Sawhney et al. 2003; Kuznetsova et al. 2006). PA biosynthetic pathways have also been studied in green algae (Cohen et al. 1984; Theiss et al. 2002; Fuell et al. 2010). Although algae produce “unusual” PAs, such as homospermidine and thermospermine (Hamana et al. 2013), the more common PAs (Put, Spd and Spm), when added to the media, promoted growth and metabolism in *C. vulgaris* (Czerpak

et al. 2003). PAs are also known to alleviate the effect of biotic and abiotic stress in plants as well as algae (Tate et al. 2013).

In the present work, a very strong increase in Put and, especially, Spd concentrations was observed in *N. oleoabundans* mixotrophic cells as compared to the autotrophic ones, both cultivated in a 20-L PBR. The growth-promoting role of PAs could explain the faster (0-4 days) and stronger cell density increase (ca. 33 x 10^6 cell mL^{-1}) in mixotrophic cultures relative to the autotrophic ones (0-9 days; ca. 22 x 10^6 cell mL^{-1}). The higher PA concentrations in mixotrophically grown cells also suggest that, under these culture conditions, algal cells may be better protected from stress-inducing factors, e.g., bacterial contamination. To our knowledge, the presence of PAs released into algal growth medium in PBRs has not been documented before. The release of PAs (predominantly Spd) from autotrophic and mixotrophic cells into their respective (E and EG) exhausted media was not significantly different. However, the presence of these plant growth regulators seems to contribute to the promotion of *N. oleoabundans* growth in both media replenished with nitrate and phosphate. In fact, during the entire experiment, a higher cell density was observed in E+ relative to C medium. Moreover, the EG+ samples showed a promotion of cell density, albeit similar to that of C.

Both autotrophic and mixotrophic exhausted media also contained FFAs, which could have induced a change in the normal metabolism of *N. oleoabundans*. This assumption is demonstrated by the more rapid consumption of nitrate and phosphate, the decreased photosynthetic pigments content and the strong decline in the F_V/F_M ratio observed in cells grown in E+ and EG+ media. These results corroborate the assumption that microalgae release metabolites in high cell density cultures (Richmond 2004) or as a consequence of stressful conditions (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006). Even if the role of FFAs is currently under debate (Ikawa 2004; Stephen et al. 2010), recent studies showed that they can strongly inhibit growth or exert cytotoxic effects on microalgae (Kogteva and Bezuglov 1998; Wu et al. 2006; Bosma et al. 2008; Stephen et al. 2010). In fact, the presence of these metabolites, and their oxidative products, negatively affect biomass productivity, especially when the microalgae are cultivated in recycled medium (Lívanský et al. 1996; Rodolfi et al. 2003).

Granum et al. (2002) reported that the accumulation of intracellular lipids in microalgae enhanced the release of FFAs into the culture medium, and Harun et al. (2010) observed that this release was caused by cell lysis.

In this work, FFA composition in autotrophic (E) and mixotrophic (EG) media after *N. oleoabundans* cultivation was similar. The only main difference was represented by the presence of the monoenoic oleic acid (C18:1ω9) in EG medium. Oleic acid is one of the major lipid components in lipid-enriched *N. oleoabundans* grown under N-stress conditions (Popovich et al. 2012). It is reported that mixotrophic cultivation alters N:C ratio, inducing similar lipid production as N-depleted autotrophic cultures (Giovanardi et al. 2014). Probably for this reason, the release of oleic acid occurred only in the mixotrophic growth medium. Moreover, Wu et al. (2006) observed altered plasma membrane permeability due to the toxic effects of FFAs in two Chlorophyta (*C. vulgaris* and *Monoraphidium contortum*) and in a cyanobacterium (*Anabaena* P-9). The rapid consumption of phosphate in both exhausted media could be linked to an alteration in membrane permeability, due to the activity of FFAs (Ikawa 2004; Wu et al. 2006). In addition, FFAs can cause inhibition of the PSII and PSI electron transport chains (Siegenthaler 1973) and disorganization of thylakoids (Wu et al. 2006). Indeed, *N. oleoabundans* cells in E+ and EG+ were characterized by alterations of the photosynthetic apparatus. These cells, in fact, contained less photosynthetic pigments than C cells, and exhibited a drastic decrease of the PSII maximum quantum yield (F_V/F_M). These variations are linked to an alteration of photosynthetic efficiency, especially as regards PSII (White et al. 2011). The decreased photosynthetic pigment contents, observed in cells grown in E+ and EG+, also reflected the changes in thylakoid membrane arrangement (Baldisserotto et al. 2012). Therefore, correct thylakoid organization is necessary to maintain optimal photosynthetic activity and this is often influenced by culture conditions (Nevo et al. 2012). In addition, the presence of some plastoglobules in chloroplasts of algal cells, grown on exhausted media, could be another indicator of an alteration of photosynthetic membranes (Besagni and Kessler 2013). On the contrary, *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in C medium showed stable and

normal F_V/F_M values throughout the experiment (Giovanardi et al. 2014), and the typical assembly of thylakoid membranes (Nevo et al. 2012; Baldisserotto et al. 2012; Giovanardi et al. 2014).

The presence of lipid droplets, observed only at the end of the experiment in C, E+ and EG+ cells, is probably related to aging of the microalgal cultures (Hu et al. 2008; Baldisserotto et al. 2012), rather than to the use of recycled culture media.

In conclusion, results presented here demonstrate that recycling autotrophic and mixotrophic growth media is a suitable solution to obtain high cell density cultures of the microalga *N. oleoabundans*. For this reason, they represent a contribution for improving the scale-up of microalgal cultivation while providing a more sustainable ecological impact on water resources. However, further studies are needed to deepen knowledge on the nature and the specific role of some molecules that are released into the growth media, in order to obtain useful information for the advancement of the biotechnological use of this strain.

Acknowledgements

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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Figure captions:

Fig 1 (**a-e)** Growth kinetics (**a**) and morphology (**b-e**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells autotrophically cultivated in a 20-L PBR in BM medium. Light (**b, d**) and fluorescence microscope observations (**c, e**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 3 (**b, c**) and 25 (**d, e**) days of autotrophic cultivation. (**f-j**) Growth kinetics (**f**) and cell morphology (**g-j**) of *N. oleoabundans* cultivated in a 20-L PBR in BM medium under mixotrophic conditions (supplemented with 2.5 gL^{-1} of glucose). Light (**g, i**) and fluorescence microscope observations (**h, j**) of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 3 (**g, h**) and 8 (**d, e**) days of mixotrophic cultivation. In both graphs, curves are constructed on a $\log_2$ scale and data are means ± s.d. (n=3). In all micrographs, bars: 2 μm

Fig 2 (a) Growth kinetics of *N. oleoabundans* in BM medium (filled circles), E+ medium (empty squares) and EG+ medium (empty diamonds). (**b)** Growth rates, calculated during the exponential phase (0–3 days time interval of cultivation), of cells grown in BM (white), E+ (light grey) and EG+ (dark grey) media. The growth curve is constructed on a $\log_2$ scale and data are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 3 Time-course variations in the concentrations of nitrate (**a**) and of phosphate (**b**) in culture media of *N. oleoabundans* during 25 days of cultivation on BM medium (white), E+ medium (light grey) and EG+ medium (dark grey). Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 4 Time-course variations of Chl*a* (**a**), Chl*b* (**b**) and Car content (**c**) in *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in BM (filled circles), E+ (empty squares) and EG+ (empty diamonds) media during the 25 days of cultivation. Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 5 Time-course variations of PSII maximum quantum yield (F_V/F_M ratio) in *N. oleoabundans* cells grown in BM (filled circles), E+ (empty squares) and EG+ (empty diamonds) media during the 25 days of cultivation. Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

Fig 6 Light and fluorescence microscopy observations of *N. oleoabundans* cells at 12 days of cultivation. (**a)** Control cells and **(b**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast; (**c)** cell grown in E+ medium and (**d**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast; (**e)** cell grown in EG+ medium and (**f**) the relative fluorescence of the chloroplast. In all micrographs, bars: 2 μm

Fig 7 Light and epifluorescence pictures of *N. oleoabundans* cells after 25 days of growth. (**a)** Control cells and (**b**) relative Nile Red-staining observation, (**c**) cells grown in E+ medium and (**d**) relative Nile Red-staining observation, and (**e)** cells grown in E+ medium and (**f**) relative Nile Red-staining observation in EG+ medium. Translucent globules are indicated with arrows. In all micrographs, bars: 2 μm

Fig **8** Transmission electron micrographs of *N. oleoabundans* cells at 12 days of cultivation. (**a**) Cell grown in BM medium and (**b**) detail of its chloroplast showing the typical thylakoid membranes organization (white arrow). (**c**) Cell grown in E+ medium and (**d**) detail of its chloroplast with quite compact and appressed (white arrow) thylakoids. (**e**) Cell grown in EG+ medium and (**f-h**) details of its chloroplast. The presence of intermediate stages of thylakoid membranes are evident in EG+ cells, showing a general disorganisation of thylakoid membranes (**f-h**), which appeared wavy, loose and sometimes swollen (**f, g**). (**h**) Some plastoglobules in proximity of thylakoid membranes are also observed (arrowheads). P, pyrenoid; N, nucleus, M, mithochondrion. Bars: 0.5 μm (a, c, e); 0.05 μm (b, d, f, g, h)

Fig **9** Polyamine concentrations **(a)** in *N. oleoabundans* cells cultivated in a 20-L PBR autotrophically and mixotrophically at 15 and 8 days of cultivation, respectively, and (**b)** in the corresponding exhausted E and EG growth media. Autotrophic cells (white), mixotrophic cells (dark), E+ (light grey) and EG+ medium (dark grey). Values are means ± s.d. (n=3)

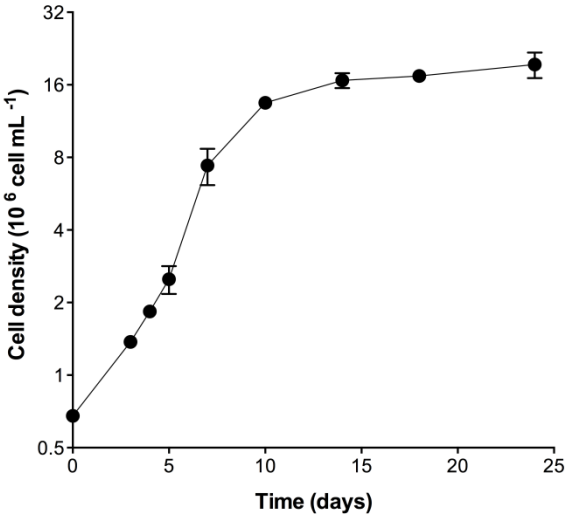
Table

Table 1 Extracellular free fatty acids composition in the exhausted E and EG media of *N. oleoabundans* grown in 20-L PBR, after 15 and 8 days of cultivation, respectively.

Fatty Acids	Abbreviation	E medium	EG medium
Myristic Acid	C14:0	2.16 ± 0.09	2.09 ± 0.04
Palmitic Acid	C16:0	33.54 ± 0.01	34.43 ± 2.80
Stearic Acid	C18:0	64.31 ± 0.10	56.56 ± 2.71
Oleic Acid	C18:1ω9	nd	5.93 ± 1.47

Values are expressed as percentage of total fatty acids and are means ± s.d. (n=2).

Figure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5
10
15
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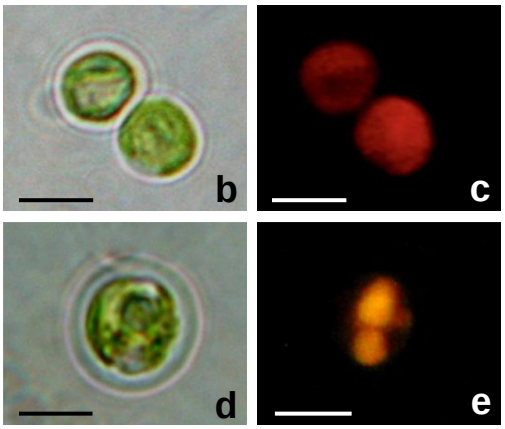
25
Time (days)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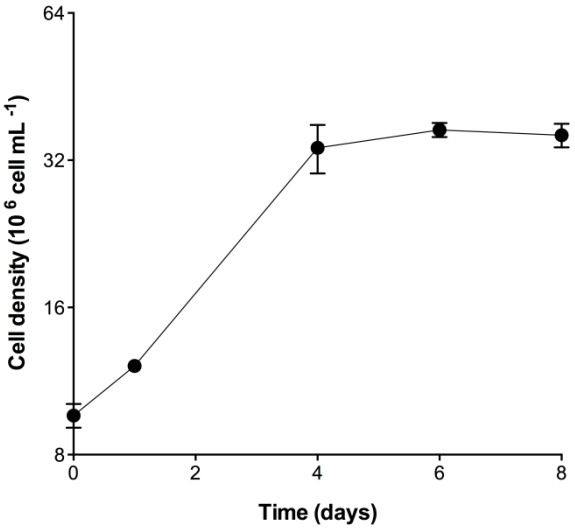
a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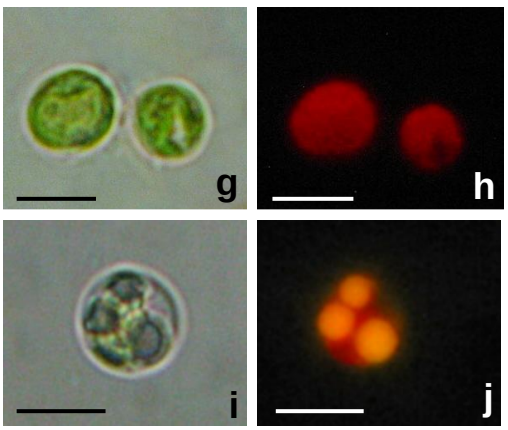
6
8
Time (days)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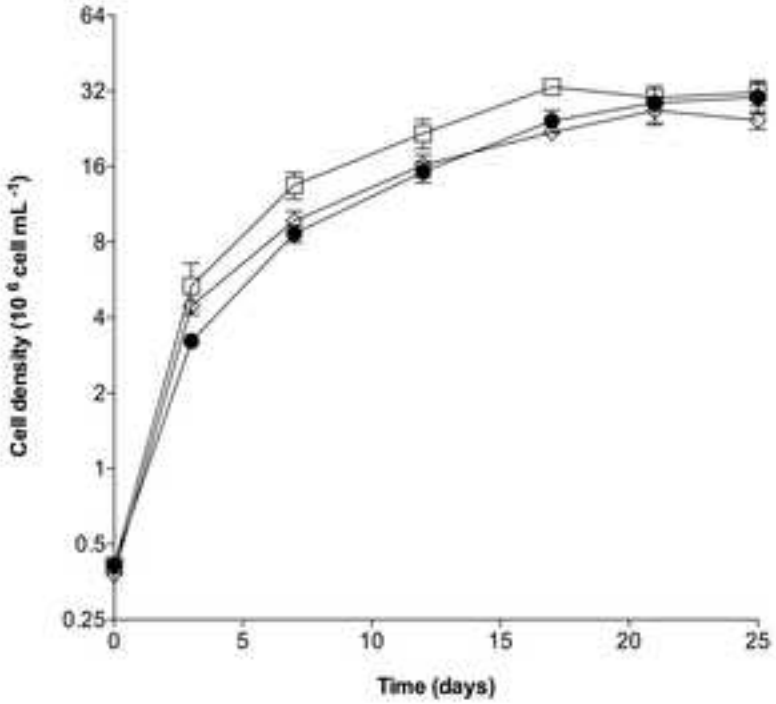

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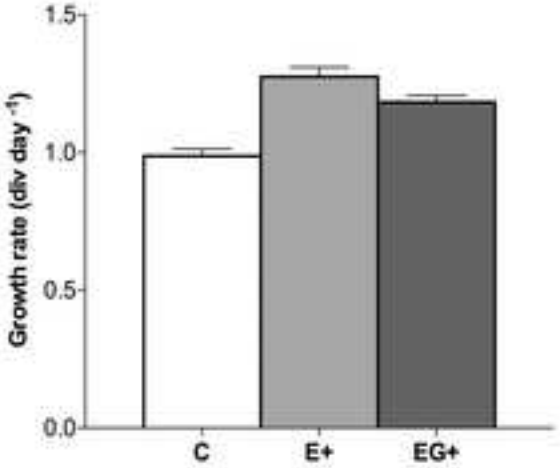

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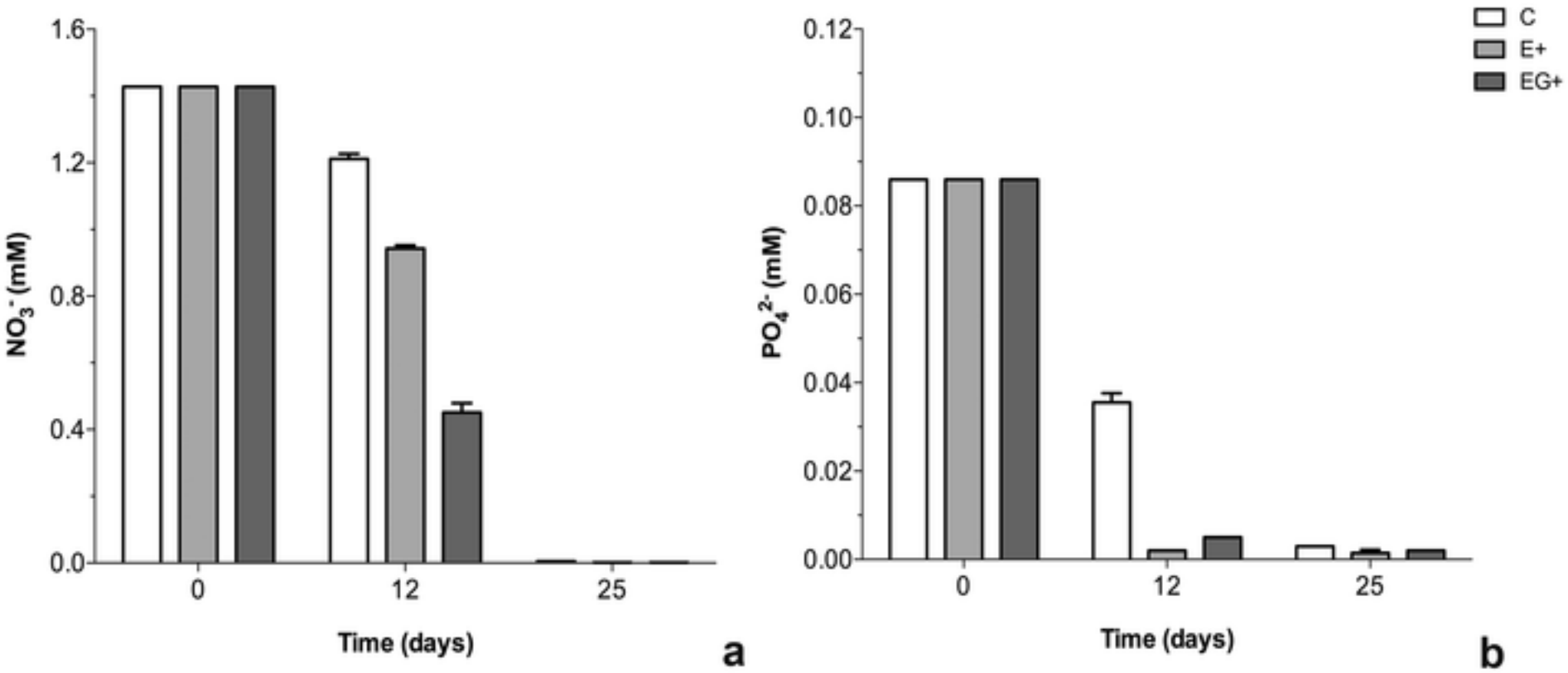

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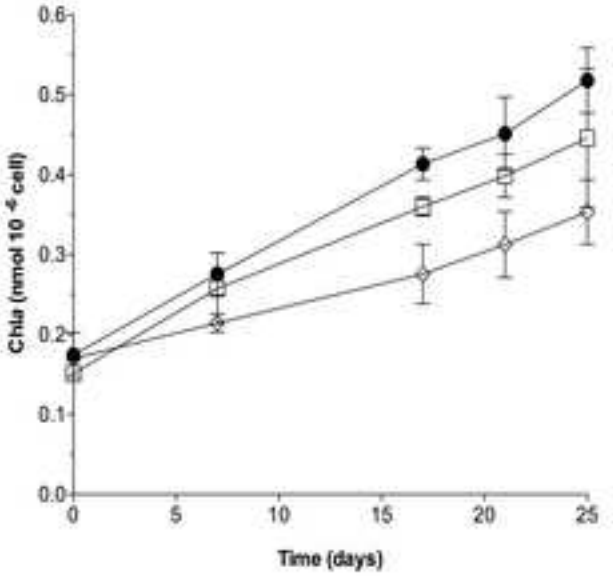

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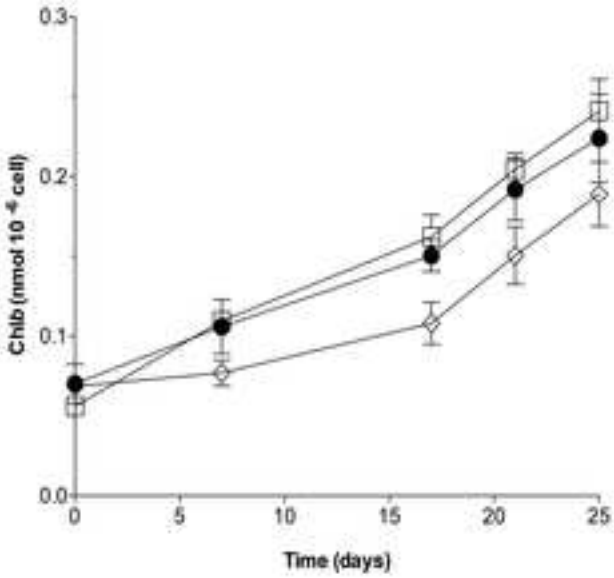

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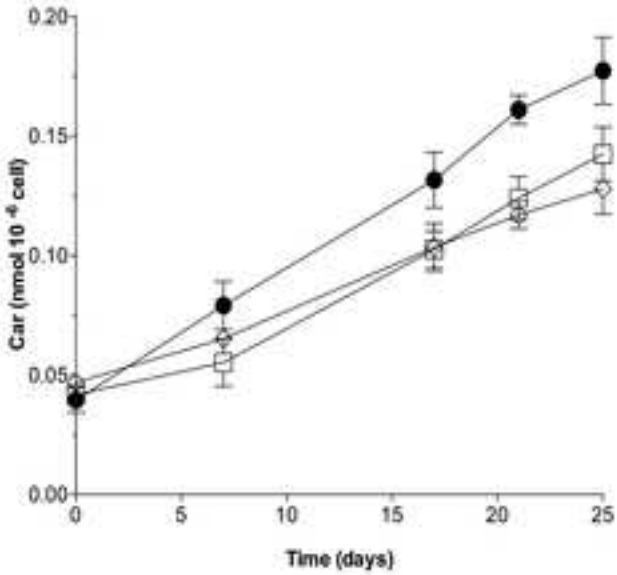

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Figure
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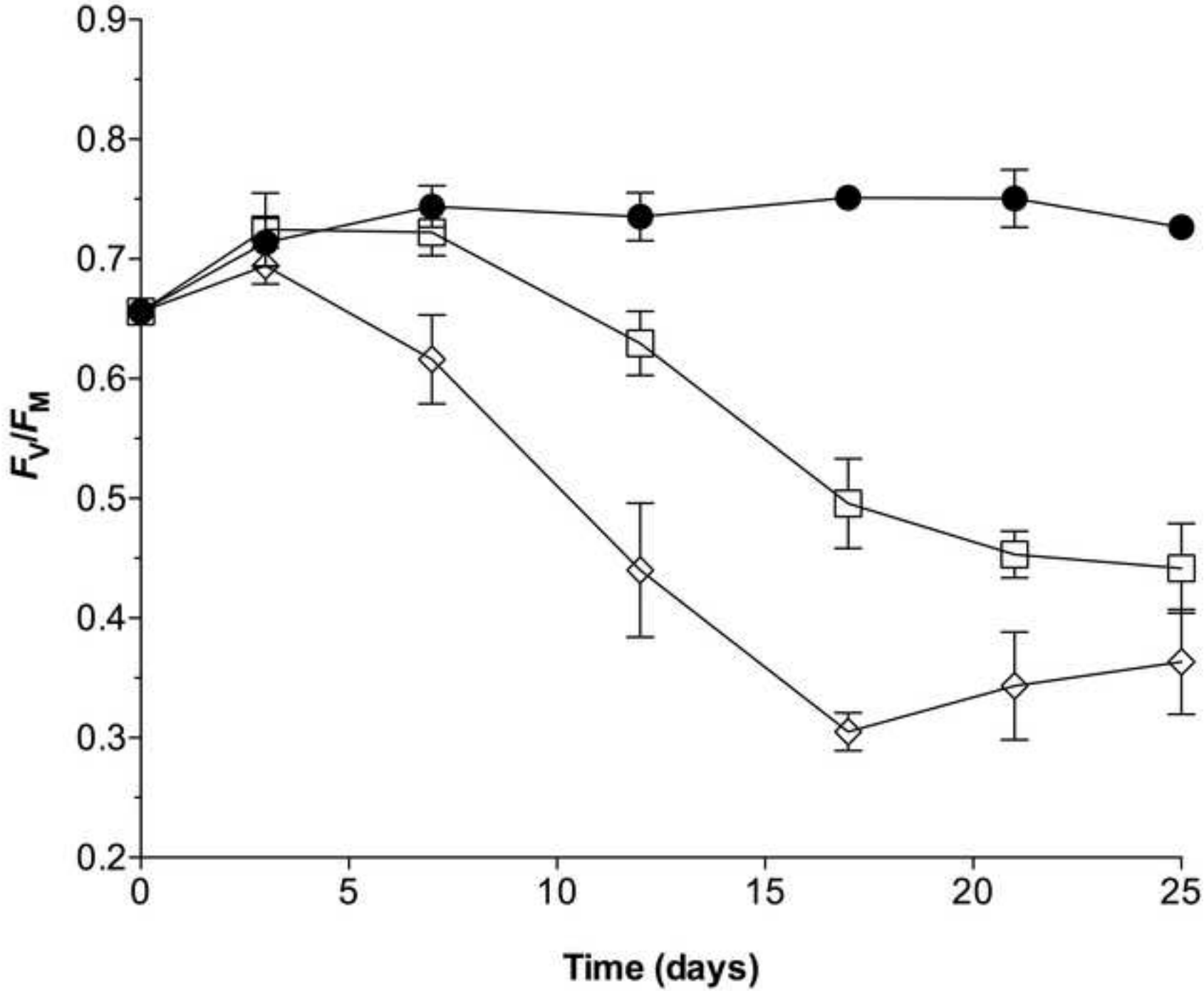

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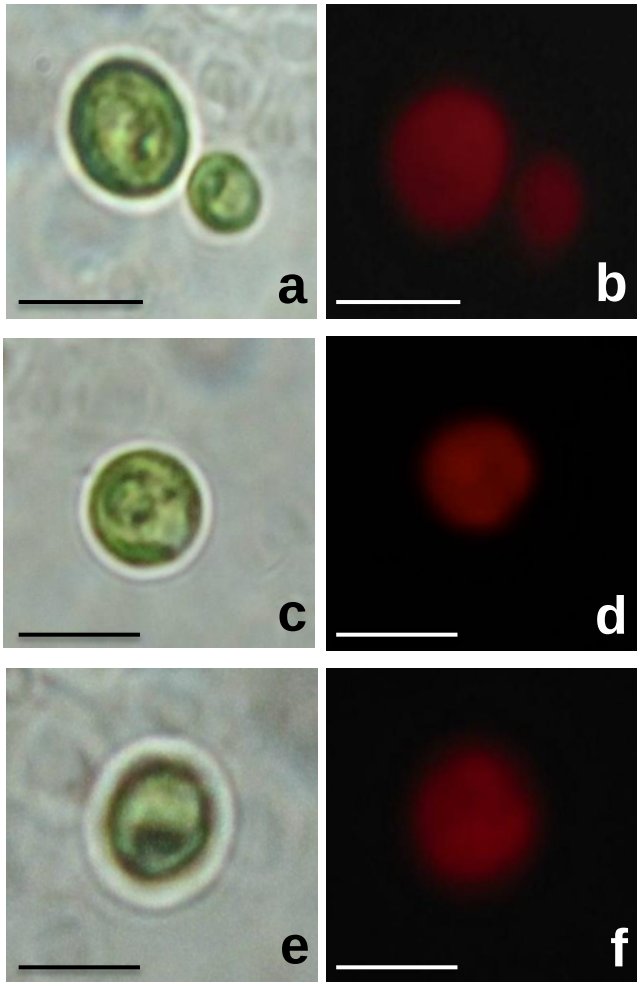

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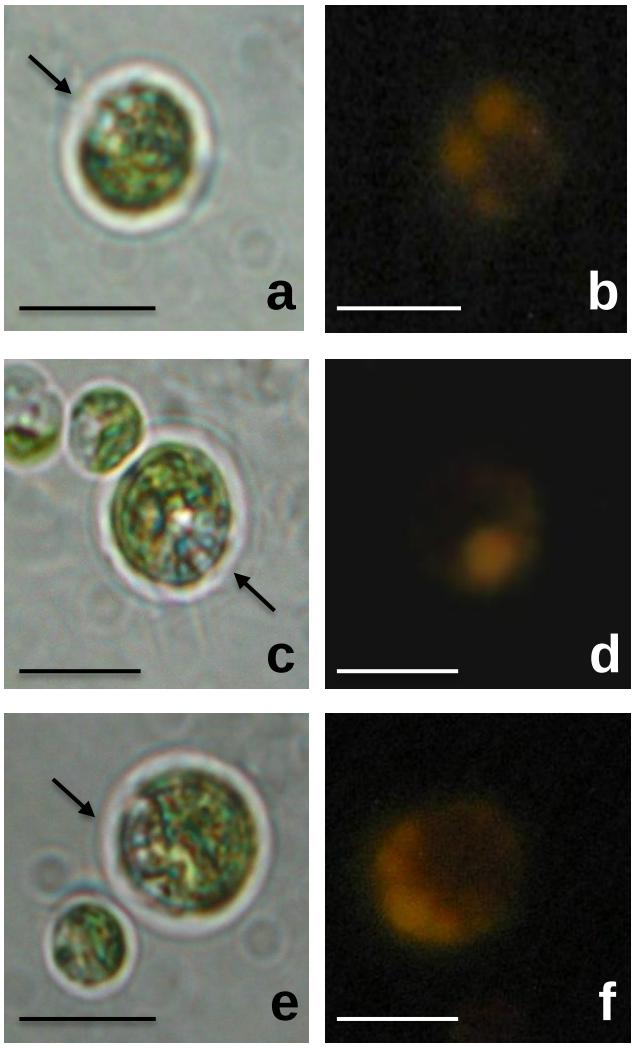

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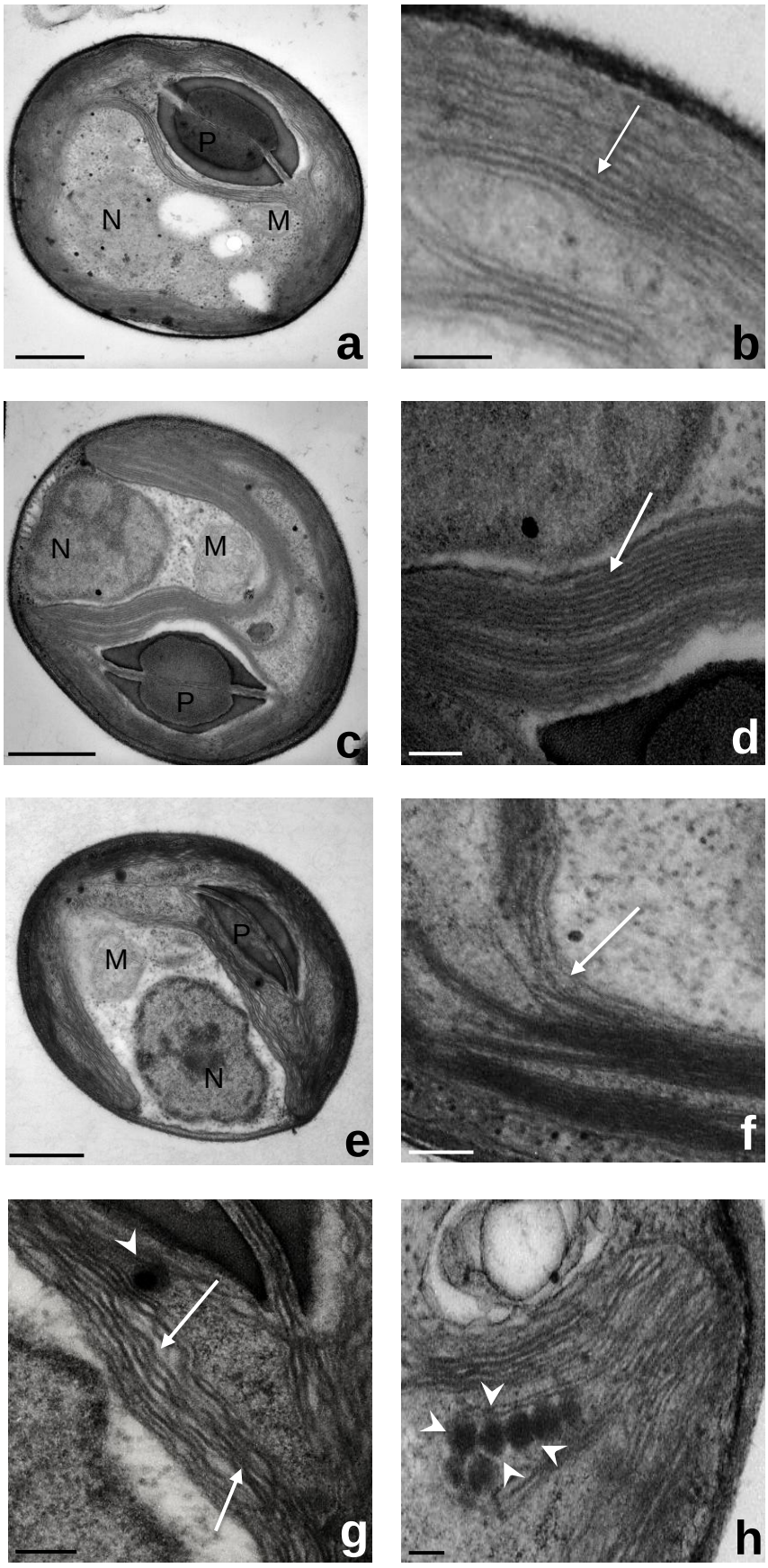

Figure
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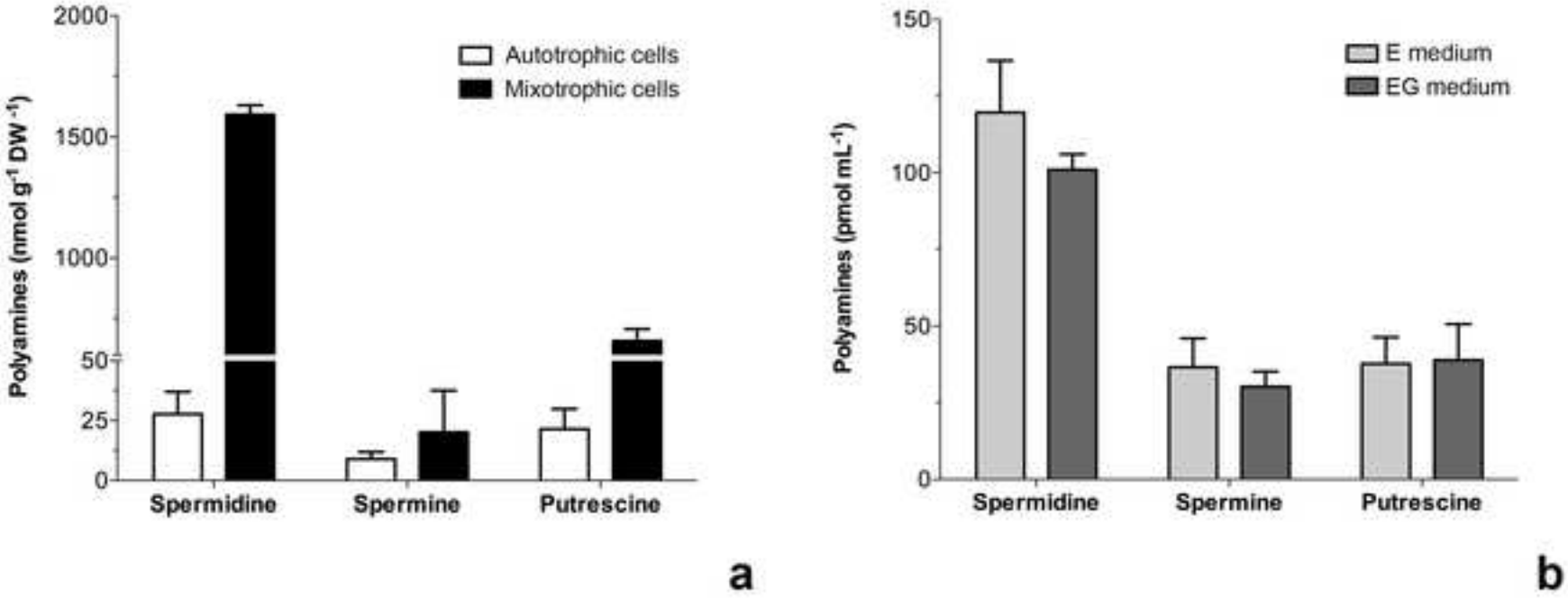

Supplementary Material

Click here to download Supplementary Material: Figure S1.pdf