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Alva Smith[1*], Jack Hearn[2], Clare Taylor[1], Nick Wheelhouse[1], Maciej Kaczmarek[1], Edwin Moorhouse[3], Ian Singleton[1]

1 School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University

2 Department of Vector Biology, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

3 Agri-Food Solutions, Cranbrook, UK

*Corresponding Author – E: alva.smith@napier.ac.uk   A: 6/1 Arneil Place, Edinburgh, EH5 2GP.

Abstract

Listeria monocytogenes is sporadically detected on a range of ready to eat fresh produce lines, such as spinach and rocket, and is a threat to public health. However, little is known about the diversity of *L. monocytogenes* present on fresh produce and their potential pathogenicity. In this work, fifteen *Listeria monocytogenes* isolates from the UK fresh produce supply chain were characterised using whole genome sequencing (WGS). Additionally, isolates were characterised based on their ability to form biofilm. Whole genome sequencing data was used to determine the sequence type of isolates based on multi-locus sequence typing (MLST), construct a core single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) phylogeny and determine the presence of virulence and resistance associated genes. MLST revealed 9 distinct sequence types (STs) spanning 2 lineages (I & II) with one isolate belonging to the ST6 subtype, strains from which have been recently implicated in two large, food-associated *L. monocytogenes* outbreaks in South Africa and across Europe. Although most of the 15 isolates were different, comparison of core genome SNPs showed 4 pairs of 'indistinguishable' strains (< 5 SNPs difference). Virulence profiling revealed that some isolates completely lacked the Listeria pathogenicity island-3 (LIPI-3) amongst other virulence factors. Investigation of the *inlA* gene showed that no strains in this study contained a premature stop codon (PMSC), an indicator of

attenuated virulence. Assessment of biofilm production showed that isolates found in the fresh produce supply chain differ in their ability to form biofilm. This trait is considered important for *L. monocytogenes* to persist in environments associated with food production and processing. Overall the work indicates that a genetically diverse range of *L. monocytogenes* strains is present in the UK fresh produce supply chain and the virulence profiles found suggests that at least some of the strains are capable of causing human illness. Interestingly, the presence of some genetically indistinguishable isolates within the 15 isolates examined suggests that cross-contamination in the fresh produce environment does occur. These findings have useful implications in terms of food safety and for informing microbial surveillance programmes in the UK fresh produce supply chain.

Keywords: Listeria, Contamination, Fresh Produce, Whole Genome Sequencing, Virulence, Food Microbiology

1. Introduction

Listeria monocytogenes is a Gram-positive, facultative anaerobic bacterial pathogen that is ubiquitous in the environment. It is the causative agent of listeriosis, an intracellular disease which predominantly affects the elderly, immunosuppressed and pregnant women along with their unborn or new-born babies. Although incidence of the disease is low compared to other foodborne pathogens (Hernandez-Milian and Payeras-Cifre, 2014), the disease outcome is often more serious, making it a priority pathogen in many countries. Foods which have been previously implicated in *L. monocytogenes* outbreaks include milk, soft cheeses, delicatessen meats and fresh produce (both fruit and vegetables). Fresh fruit and vegetables account for a significant proportion of the UK market and consumer attitudes are increasingly leaning towards healthy, convenient options such as ready to eat bagged salads and prepared fruit and vegetables (Keynote, 2015). The UK fresh produce supply chain is complex and there are many potential sources of *L. monocytogenes* contamination. These include; soil splash, contaminated irrigation water, wild animal faecal contamination and cross contamination from surfaces and personnel in the processing environment (Smith et al., 2018).

Microbial testing for *L. monocytogenes* and other microbial pathogens in the supply chain of a variety of products, such as spinach, rocket and kale, is obligatory through regulation. According to current practice, discovery of *L. monocytogenes* in the supply chain results in increased sampling and a review of the risk assessments to determine possible sources of the bacterium and demonstrate that there is no on-going risk to other consignments (Monaghan et al., 2009).

The advent of sub-typing techniques, such as pulse-gel field electrophoresis (PGFE) and whole genome sequencing (WGS), has enabled source tracking of *L. monocytogenes* during outbreak investigations, but these technologies are not yet used for general surveillance in food supply chains because of their cost, complexity of analysis and the expertise required to interpret such data. Investigating bodies employ these technologies to identify the source of a *L. monocytogenes* outbreak through identifying related cases of listeriosis, identifying the outbreak strain/strains in one or more common food items, and finally (through targeted sampling and traceability of foodstuffs in the supply chain) identifying the offending stage/location in a supply chain (Pouillot et al., 2016). Once the source of the bacteria has been identified, regulatory authorities can take necessary steps to eradicate the source and prevent further contamination. In addition to source tracking, subtyping of *L. monocytogenes* strains using WGS can reveal pathogenic profiles and infer relative risk to the consumer.

Determining the virulence potential of isolates is important in terms of public health as differences in virulence between *L. monocytogenes* strains may influence infection and clinical outcome. It is worth nothing that all strains of *L. monocytogenes* are currently treated equally for regulatory purposes (Fravalo et al., 2017), however, some strains are highly pathogenic and are more often associated with epidemics of disease, whereas others can be less virulent and are rarely associated with epidemics (Velge and Roche, 2010). For example, the majority of clinical *L. monocytogenes* strains fall into phylogenetic lineage I, and hypervirulent strains belonging to sequence type-6 (ST6) have been implicated recently in two large outbreaks of foodborne listeriosis which caused

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widespread illness and mortality (European Food Safety Authority, 2018; National Listeria Incident Management Team, 2018). Further, it is widely acknowledged that premature stop codons (PMSCs) in the *inlA* gene which result in a truncated and expressed internalin-A and attenuated virulence exist within the species (Gelbíčová et al., 2015). Observation of this characteristic in strains isolated from food and environmental sources compared to clinical sources has been recognised (Fravalo et al., 2017). However, a recent study from Ireland demonstrated that five out of the six *L. monocytogenes* strains isolated from food did not contain PMSCs in *inlA* (Hilliard et al., 2018), showing that this characteristic from environmental strains requires further investigation. In addition to virulence potential, it is important to determine the ability of *L. monocytogenes* isolates to form biofilm, as this trait is potentially important for survival in many parts of the fresh produce supply chain including the processing environment, where biofilms can be formed on many different surfaces and serve as a subsequent source of contamination (Colagiorgi et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018).

To determine the relatedness of strains and establish a virulence profile, this study characterised the subtype of various *L. monocytogenes* isolates found in the UK fresh produce supply chain. This was based on their sequence type and the development of a phylogenetic framework using core genome SNPs. In addition, genomes were examined for the presence of resistance genes, virulence-associated genes and evidence for PMSCs in *inlA*. Furthermore, we assessed the ability of isolates to form biofilm.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Bacterial isolates

In total, 15 *L. monocytogenes* strains were sent to Edinburgh Napier University (ENU) from a commercial food testing laboratory. These strains were isolated from various parts of the UK fresh produce supply chain (see Table 1. for details) as part of routine food testing procedures carried out by food production and processing companies between May 2016 and April 2017. *L. monocytogenes*

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strains were either isolated directly from product (in the case of the environmental strain, from a swab) using ISO 11290-2: 2017. Bacterial species identification was carried out by a commercial food microbial testing lab and confirmed using biochemical tests (API Listeria, bioMerieux/Microbact Listeria, Thermo Scientific) or using MALDI-TOF technology (Vitek MS, bioMerieux). *L. monocytogenes* was streaked on a nutrient agar slope and sent to Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill Campus before being sub cultured, twice from a single colony at 37°C for 24h, on OXFORD agar with modified *Listeria* selective supplement (Oxoid). To make long term stocks, a single colony was used to inoculate 10ml BHI broth (Oxoid) and shaking cultures were incubated at 200rpm, 37°C overnight (~16h) before 1ml of this culture was centrifuged at 12,000rpm for 10 min. Resulting bacterial pellets were subsequently washed 3 times in PBS and resuspended in 500µl fresh BHI broth + 500µl of 50% glycerol. Long term stocks were frozen at -80°C until preparation for whole genome sequencing.

Table 1. **Characteristics, sample information and sequence type of 15 *L. monocytogenes* isolates from the UK fresh produce supply chain**

Internal Reference	Sample type	Sample date	Sample location	Stage in supply chain	Lineage	Sequence Type
NLmo2	Spinach	May-16	West Sussex, UK	Raw Product, Unwashed	I	ST-5
NLmo3	Spinach	May-16	West Sussex, UK	Raw Product, Unwashed	I	ST-5
NLmo4	Environmental swab (drain)	May-16	West Sussex, UK	Tray cleaning facility	II	ST-325
NLmo5	Spinach	May-16	West Sussex, UK	Raw Product, Unwashed	II	ST-325
NLmo6	Red leaf	Jun-16	Norfolk, UK	Raw Product,	I	ST-4

	lettuce			Unwashed		
NLmo7	Spinach	Jun-16	West Sussex, UK	Post Cooling, Unwashed	I	ST-1
NLmo8	Spinach	Aug-16	Cambridgeshire, UK	Final Product, Unwashed	I	ST-219
NLmo9	Spinach	Jul-16	Cambridgeshire, UK	Final Product, Unwashed	I	ST-4
NLmo10	Spinach	Sep-16	Cambridgeshire, UK	Post Cooling, Unwashed	I	ST-1
NLmo13	Spinach	Sep-16	Cambridgeshire, UK	Final Product, Unwashed	II	ST-37
NLmo14	Beetroot	Oct-16	Cambridgeshire, UK	Final Product, Washed	I	ST-1
NLmo15	Peashoots	Oct-16	Cambridgeshire, UK	Final Product, Unwashed	II	ST-204
NLmo16	Spinach	Nov-16	Cambridgeshire, UK	Final Product, Unwashed	II	ST-37
NLmo18	Baby salad kale	Apr-17	Cambridgeshire, UK	Post Cooling, Unwashed	II	ST-399
NLmo20	Baby salad kale	Apr-17	Cambridgeshire, UK	Final Product, Unwashed	I	ST-6

2.2. DNA extraction and whole genome sequencing

From long term stocks, a lawn of bacteria was grown on BHI agar (Oxoid) before being transferred to

a barcoded cryovial (MicrobesNG) containing beads and preparation broth, then briefly vortexed

before being sent to MicrobesNG (University of Birmingham, UK) for DNA extraction and whole genome sequencing. For DNA extraction, three beads were washed with extraction buffer containing lysozyme and RNase A, incubated for 25 min at 37°C. Proteinase K and RNaseA were added and incubated for 5 min at 65°C. Genomic DNA was purified using an equal volume of SPRI beads and resuspended in EB buffer. DNA was quantified in triplicates with the Quantit dsDNA HS assay in an Eppendorf AF2200 plate reader. Genomic DNA libraries were prepared using Nextera XT Library Prep Kit (Illumina, San Diego, USA) following the manufacturer's protocol with the following modifications: two nanograms of DNA instead of one were used as input, and PCR elongation time increased to 1 minute from 30 seconds. DNA quantification and library preparation were carried out on a Hamilton Microlab STAR automated liquid handling system. Pooled libraries were quantified using the Kapa Biosystems Library Quantification Kit for Illumina on a Roche light cycler 96 qPCR machine. Libraries were sequenced on the Illumina HiSeq using a 250bp paired end protocol, with a target 30-fold depth of coverage.

2.3. Bioinformatics methods

2.3.1 *De novo* assembly, species identification, multi-locus sequence typing, virulome and resistome

Illumina reads were adapter trimmed using Trimmomatic 0.30 with a sliding window quality cut-off of Q15 (Bolger et al., 2014). Trimmed sequencing reads were then processed using a customised, open source bioinformatics pipeline for the handling of sequence data (https://github.com/tseemann/nullarbor). Within the pipeline, *de novo* assembly was performed on samples using SKESA version 2.1 (Souvorov et al., 2018) with the default parameters. Genome annotation was carried out by Prokka (Seemann, 2014). Species identification was carried out by k-mer analysis against a known database (MiniKraken 8GB). Assembled genomes were then scanned for sequence type using MLST version 2.11 (Seemann https://github.com/tseemann/mlst). Virulence and resistance genes were detected by Abricate, version 0.8 (Seemann

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https://github.com/tseemann/abricate), which uses BLAST+ & EMBOSS to screen contigs against databases of known sequences of virulence and resistance genes. Virulence and resistance genes were detected by comparison to the Database for Virulence Factors of Pathogenic Bacteria (VFDB) (L. Chen et al., 2016) and Resfinder (Zankari et al., 2012) databases, respectively. Virulence and resistance genes were considered present when coverage ≥ 95% and identity > 75%, probable when coverage ≥ 36.4% and identity > 75% and missing when undetected. We corroborated Abricate results by manually inspecting Abricate output tables where % coverage, % identity, gene name, accession number and position in a contig were reported. When genes were reported as partial or in two parts, genome annotations (generated by Prokka) were manually inspected, a complete ORF was identified and the annotated nucleotide sequence of the gene was copied and subsequently used in BLAST (Altschul et al., 1990) to ascertain homology with known sequences. When the full-length gene returned coverage ≥ 95% and identity > 75% to *L. monocytogenes*, genes were considered present. If the annotated gene was not found in the genome annotation, as was the case with *ami*, gene nucleotide sequence was copied from the VDFB *Listeria* database and used to BLAST against the contig where it was identified by Abricate. *Ami* was considered present when BLAST results returned ≥ 95% and identity > 75%. Occasionally, virulence genes fell between contigs. In these cases, gene presence was considered probable due to the high % identity of these sequences but low % coverage.

2.3.1.1 Determination of PMSCs in inlA

To determine whether strains contained a PMSC in the *inlA* gene, Abricate output tables were used to locate the position of full length *inlA* in (2403bp) in SnapGene Viewer. This sequence was then uploaded to MEGAX for all strains and sequences were subsequently aligned to *L. monocytogenes* EGD-e *inlA* reference using the MUSCLE algorithm. Alignment was then manually inspected for PMSCs in *inlA* based on those which have been previously reported (Gelbíčová et al., 2015).

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2.3.2. Global core genome alignment and construction of Maximum Likelihood phylogeny based on core genome SNPs

To obtain a global alignment of all isolates included in this study, per sample sequence reads were mapped to *L. monocytogenes* EGD-e (NCBI: AL591824.1, 2,9445,28 bp), a ST35, lineage II, *L. monocytogenes* reference genome. For SNP based analysis, read mapping, and core genome alignment were performed using the Snippy pipeline, version 4.0 (Seemann https://github.com/tseemann/snippy). Sequence reads were aligned to the reference genome and sites that were covered by less than 10 reads were not included in analysis. Any site where at least one of the isolates had a SNP and none of the isolates were absent was considered a core-SNP site. Core-SNPs were used as output to determine the phylogeny of the *L. monocytogenes* population which was inferred by IQ-TREE version 1.6.7 (Nguyen et al., 2015) using the Maximum Likelihood method with model finder (Kalyaanamoorthy et al., 2017) option enabled. Branch support was calculated using ultrafast bootstrap support (Hoang et al., 2017) and the SH-like approximate likelihood ratio test (Guindon et al., 2010), both with 1000 iterations. One *L. ivanovii* isolate was isolated from the fresh produce supply chain and included in sequencing, *de novo* assembly and in core genome SNP analysis. The phylogenetic tree was rooted using *L. ivanovii* as an outgroup. The tree was then modelled and annotated in Figtree (http://tree.bio.ed.ac.uk/software/figtree/).

2.3.3. Determination of genetic relatedness between strains

To establish relatedness between *L. monocytogenes* strains from the fresh produce supply chain we considered tree topology, MLST and the pairwise SNP distance matrix computed from the core genome alignment to the reference. When determining SNP based phylogenies and examining bacterial outbreaks, different SNP-based subtyping workflows result in variation in the number of core SNPs predicted within the same data set which means that it is not possible to define a universal single cut-off value for delineation of outbreaks or in this case, indistinguishable strains (Saltykova et al., 2018). Therefore, for each workflow this threshold should be estimated separately.

Whilst different WGS analytical tools, SNP calling algorithms and reference genomes (Kwong et al., 2016) mean that SNP data is not directly comparable between studies, previous investigations on outbreaks have defined 'outbreak strains' that differ by 5, 10, 20 and 28 SNPs (Chen et al., 2017). Additionally, 'plant (i.e. facility) associated' clones have been found to differ by up to 6 SNPs (Morganti et al., 2015). Thus, the current study decided that isolates were 'indistinguishable' i.e. the same strain, when they differed by ≤ 5 SNPs.

2.4. Biofilm formation assay

Long term stocks of *L. monocytogenes* were streaked on OXFORD agar plates with modified *Listeria* selective supplement and incubated at 37°C for 24h. 10ml of tryptone soy broth (TSB, Oxoid) was inoculated from 1 isolated colony then incubated overnight in a shaking incubator at 200rpm, 37°C for 16h. After incubation, absorbance was measured at 595nm before back diluting to an OD of 0.05 in 10ml of modified Welshimer's broth (MWB, HiMedia) followed by brief vortexing. 100µl of this diluted culture was then transferred to 6 x wells of a sterile, flat bottomed polystyrene 96-well plate per strain (6 biological replicates from 1 overnight culture). 6 uninoculated MWB wells were included in the plate as a control. Plates were incubated at 20°C for 20h before the turbidity of wells was determined at 595nm using a microtiter plate reader (FLUOstar Omega). MWB was chosen as a medium for biofilm production as this media is a minimal medium and is more likely to be representative of the fresh produce supply chain environment i.e. a more nutrient limited environment, than other, more rich defined media such as brain heart infusion broth.

After measurement of cell turbidity, medium was aspirated from wells using a pipette before wells were washed 3 times with distilled water to remove loosely associated bacteria. Plates were air dried for 45 minutes before staining with 0.1% crystal violet solution in water for 45 minutes. After staining wells were washed again 3 times with distilled water. After washing, plates were left to dry for a further 45 minutes. For quantitative analysis of biofilm production, 200µl of 95% ethanol was added to de-stain wells and left at room temperature on a shaking platform for 45 minutes. 100µl of

this solution was then transferred to a fresh 96-well microtiter plate before the optical density of the de-staining solution was measured on a microtiter plate reader at 595nm. Results were blank corrected by subtracting the average absorbance from control wells (media only) from the average absorbance of test wells. To ensure that differences in biofilm production were not related to differences in growth rate, average absorbance measurements of cell turbidity versus average absorbance measurements from biofilm CV de-stain underwent a Pearson's test for correlation (GraphPad). Differences in biofilm production between strains (n=6) were determined using a one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's test for multiple comparisons (Graphpad).

3. Results

3.1. Multi locus sequence typing and SNP based phylogeny using whole genome sequencing

WGS generated various numbers of reads, between 488,048 & 4,673,156. The genomes had average depths of coverage between 31 to 308-fold of the reference. *De novo* assembly resulted in genome assemblies of 9 to 21 contigs and the consensus lengths of genomes ranged from 2.87Mb to 3.06Mb. GC content of isolates ranged from 37.4 - 38.9%. All isolates were identified as *L. monocytogenes* and had 88.87-94.64% similarity to *L. monocytogenes* using the Kraken 8GB database. For isolate specific values of data summarised above, see Appendix A.1. Using data from WGS, MLST determined 9 distinct sequence types from 15 isolates (Table 2). Some isolates shared the same sequence type with the most frequent being ST1 (3/15). No new sequence types were discovered. All isolates belonged to either phylogenetic lineage I or II. Several sets of strains could not be distinguished by MLST analysis; these being NLmo10, NLmo14 & NLmo7 (ST1), NLmo6 & NLmo9 (ST4), NLmo2 & NLmo3 (ST5), NLmo13 & NLmo16 (ST37) and NLmo4 & NLmo5 (ST325).

Table 2. **Allelic profile and number of isolates represented by each sequence type of *L. monocytogenes* isolated from the fresh produce supply chain.** The MLST scheme used to characterise *L. monocytogenes* isolates is determined by the allelic profile of 7 housekeeping genes, these are; ABC transporter (*abcZ*), beta-glucosidase (*blgA*), catalase (*cat)*, succinyl diaminopimelate

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(*dapE*), D-amino acid aminotransferase (*dat*), L-lactate dehydrogenase (*ldh*) and histidine kinase

(*lhkA*). Clonal complex and lineage information is included.

Sequence type	Clonal complex	Lineage	Number of isolates
1	CC1	I	3/15
4	CC4	I	2/15
5	CC5	I	2/15
6	CC6	I	1/15
37	CC37	II	2/15
204	CC204	II	1/15
219	CC4	I	1/15
325	CC31	II	2/15
399	CC14	II	1/15

A phylogeny of the 15 *L. monocytogenes* strains was obtained using core genome SNPs and showed

that when compared, isolates from the fresh produce supply chain differ from 0 up to 40,143 core

genome SNPs. SNP analysis allowed differences between isolates to be established in greater detail

than MLST. For example, some isolates from the same MLST groups had no SNP differences while

others were different by up to 59 SNPs (Appendix A.2). SNP analysis highlighted 4 sets of

'indistinguishable' strains, these were; NLmo2 & NLmo3, NLmo4 & NLmo5, NLmo7 & NLmo14 and

NLmo13 & NLmo16.

3.2. Prevalence of virulence- and resistance-associated genes

The 15 *L. monocytogenes* isolate genomes were analysed for the presence or absence of 42 key

virulence factors (genes) by Abricate version 0.8 using the VFDB database (L. Chen et al., 2016) and

corroborated by manual inspection of genome annotations combined with BLAST of virulence gene

sequences against contigs. The presence or absence of the full range of virulence factors can be seen

in Appendix A.3. 7 out of the 9 isolates in lineage I had 41 virulence factors present whilst 2 out of 9 (NLmo2 & NLmo3) had 34 virulence factors. Of the 6 strains that were in lineage II, 1 isolate (NLmo18) had 33 virulence factors, 3 isolates (NLmo13, NLmo15, NLmo16) had 32 virulence factors and 2 isolates (NLmo4 & NLmo5) had 31 virulence factors present. Isolates which had ≤ 41 virulence factors present were all missing the LIPI-3 gene cluster (*llsY, llsX, llsP, llsH, llsG, llsD, llsB, llsA*) which encodes to produce Listeriolysin S. Except from NLmo2 & NLmo3, isolates from lineage I were missing the *ami* gene which codes for an autolysin amidase protein. All isolates contained an intact and full length *inlA* gene, apart from NLmo20 which had a 9-nucleotide deletion in position 2212-2220bp (797 aa's), this version of Interalin A is predicted to be fully functional and isolates with this variant show similar invasion ability compared with strains full length Internalin A (Toledo et al., 2018).

Genomes were also analysed for the presence of resistance genes by scanning contigs using Abricate against the ResFinder database. All isolates carried the Fosfomycin resistance thiol transferase (*fosX*) and lincomycin resistance ABC-F type ribosomal protection protein (*lin)* genes whilst 2 isolates (NLmo4 & NLmo5) carried 2 additional, plasmid derived, resistance genes for a quaternary ammonium compound efflux transporter (*bcrB & bcrC*). Figure 1. shows the relationship between *L. monocytogenes* strains and the presence of virulence- and resistance-associated genes.
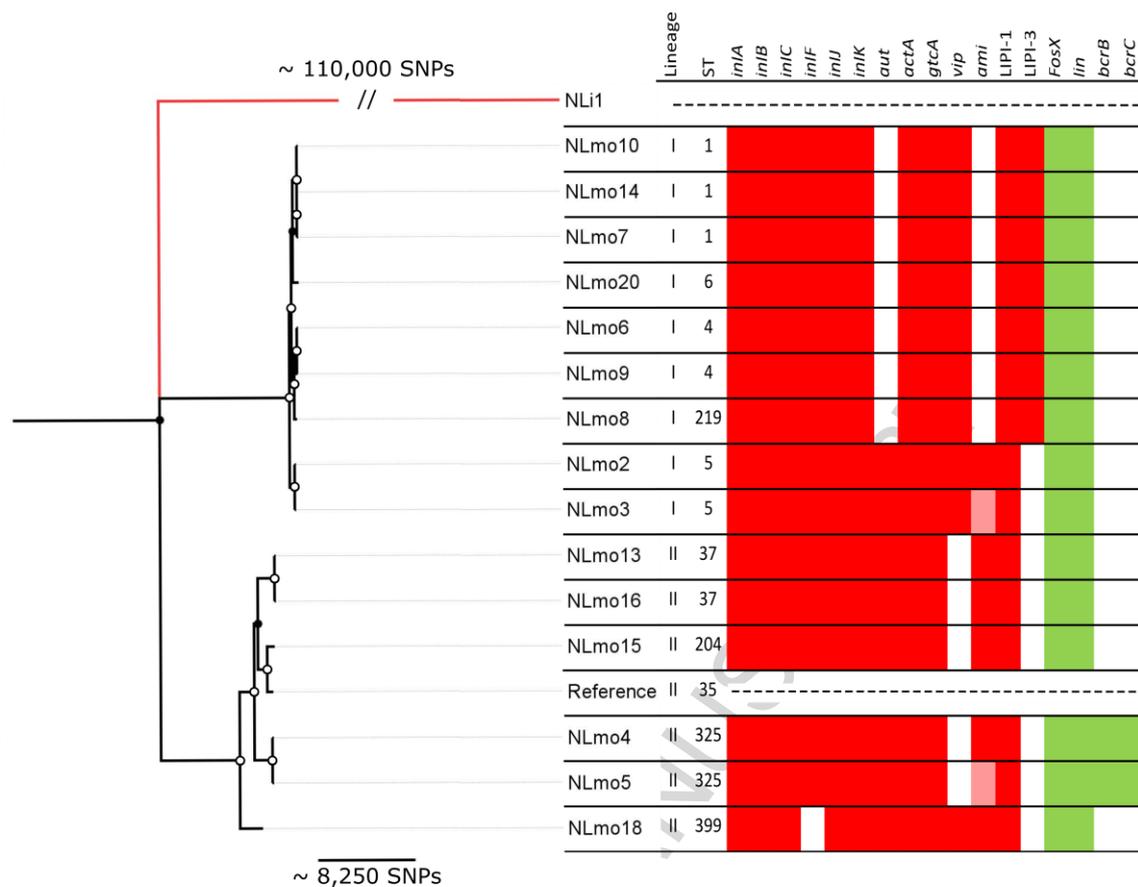
Figure 1. **Maximum Likelihood phylogeny of 15 *L. monocytogenes* isolates and 1 *L. ivanovii* isolate from the UK fresh produce supply chain in relation to the presence of virulence and resistance genes.** White circles indicate nodes with ≥ 95% ultrafast bootstrap support and ≥ 80% SH-like approximate likelihood ratio test support. The break (//) in the root branch represents a comparatively long evolutionary distance to the outgroup, *Listeria ivanovii* (NLi1), which is highlighted in red. Approximate branch distance (in SNPs) of this branch is indicated above the break. Columns right of the tree indicate presence (red) probable presence (pink) or absence (white) of *L. monocytogenes* virulence factors and presence (green) or absence (white) of resistance genes (see Appendices A.3 & A.4 for full lists of genes). Evolutionary distances were computed using the Maximum likelihood method and are in units of SNPs. The analyses involved 17 nucleotide sequences. Evolutionary analyses were conducted using IQTree version 1.6.7. tree was generated using FigTree. Dashed lines indicate strains for which no data on the presence of virulence and resistance genes was collected. ST = MLST sequence type.

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3.3. Biofilm production of *L. monocytogenes* isolates

A Pearson test for correlation between the average values of culture turbidity and biofilm production quantified by CV staining indicated that no correlation existed between these two variables ($R^2 = 0.10$, $P = 0.24$). A one-way ANOVA with Tukeys test for multiple comparisons showed that biofilm production differs significantly ($P < 0.0001$) between strains isolated from the fresh produce supply chain. Figure 2. shows that some isolates produced a comparatively small (Average $OD_{595} \leq 0.053$) amount of biofilm (NLmo4, NLmo5, NLmo7 & NLmo10), whilst others produced a moderate ($0.053 > $ Average $OD_{595} \leq 0.152$) amount of biofilm (NLmo2, NLmo3, NLmo6, NLmo13, NLmo14, NLmo15, NLmo16, NLmo20) and three isolates produced a comparatively high (Average $OD_{595} > 0.152$) amount of biofilm (NLmo8, NLmo9, NLmo18). Biofilm production was inconsistent between pairs of genetically indistinguishable strains.
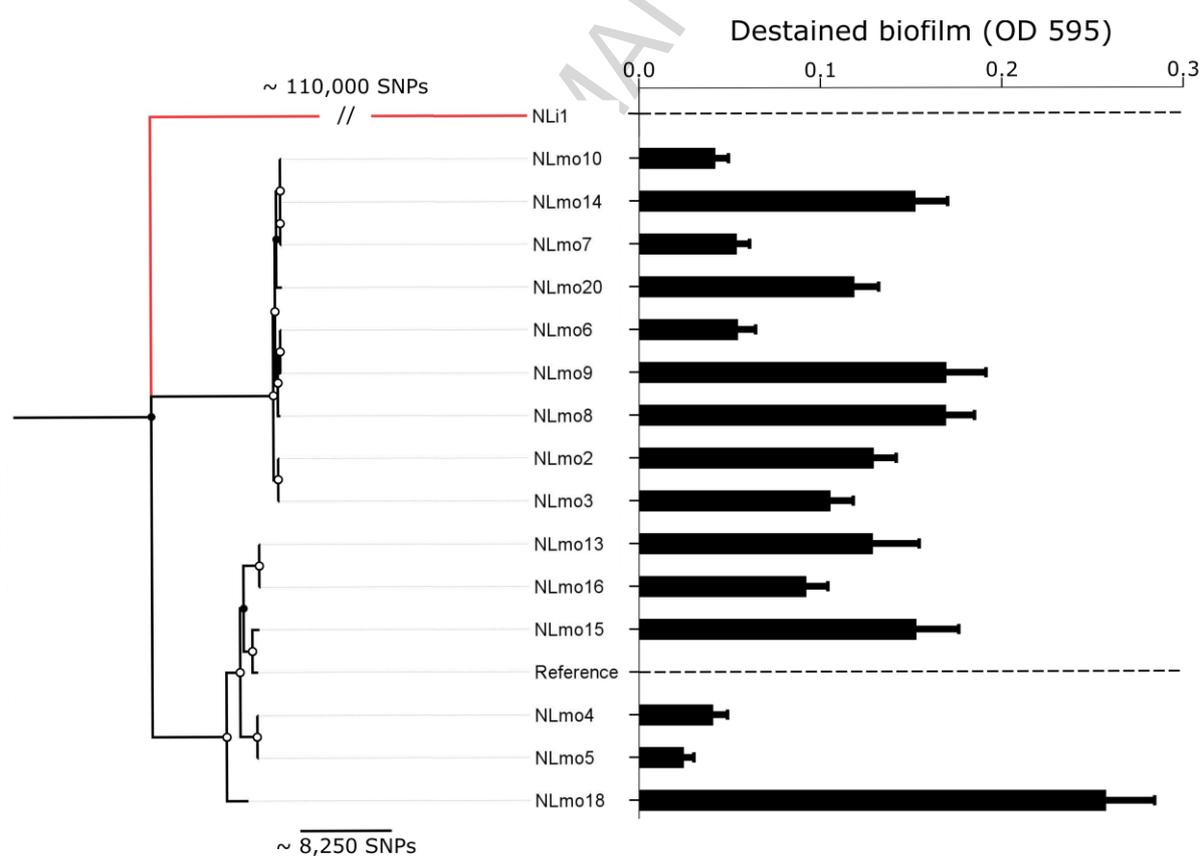
Figure 2. **Maximum Likelihood phylogeny of 15 *L. monocytogenes* isolates and 1 *L. ivanovii* isolate from the UK fresh produce supply chain trees inferred using a core-SNP based phylogeny in**

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relation to biofilm production. Biofilm production assessed by staining with crystal violet, destaining and measuring absorbance at 595nm. White circles indicate nodes with ≥ 95% ultrafast bootstrap support and ≥ 80% SH-like approximate likelihood ratio test support. The break (//) in the root branch represents a comparatively long evolutionary distance to the outgroup, *Listeria ivanovii* (NLi1), which is highlighted in red. The approximate branch distance (in SNPs) of this branch is indicated above the break. Dashed lines indicate strains for which no data on biofilm production was collected. Error bars represent SEM of 6 replicates.

4. Discussion

L. monocytogenes remains an important foodborne pathogen and is a significant threat to public health in the food supply chain as illustrated by recent outbreaks (European Food Safety Authority, 2018; National Listeria Incident Management Team, 2018). *L. monocytogenes* has been previously identified in UK foodstuffs (Little et al., 2009), but the virulence and relatedness of strains actually found in UK foods has not been characterised. This information is important for inferring the potential risk that isolates pose to consumers and in determining the source of isolates/highlighting persistent strains. Furthermore, the ability of these isolates to form biofilm has not been reported. Understanding these aspects of *L. monocytogenes* ecology in food supply chains can help regulators and operators to design more effective microbial surveillance and prevention strategies. The *L. monocytogenes* isolates from this study were obtained through standard sampling of produce and surfaces in the UK fresh produce supply chain. While it is difficult to draw general conclusions about the whole UK fresh produce supply chain due to the limited number of strains used in this study, our data provide a preliminary insight into the diversity of the *L. monocytogenes* population and virulence potential of *L. monocytogenes* directly isolated from the UK fresh produce supply chain.

MLST of isolates revealed a range of sequence types belonging to lineages I & II (Table 2). MLST is a useful tool for characterising the subtype of *L. monocytogenes* isolates and inferring virulence potential but it lacks the discriminatory power to distinguish amongst closely related strains of

the bacterium which is essential for source tracking in clinical and food environments (Lomonaco and Nucera, 2012). This observation is corroborated with these results which also demonstrate that phylogenies constructed using concatenated MLST sequences result in a tree with comparably low confidence and low discriminatory power (Appendix B). Thus, for inter-strain comparison, deeper resolution is achieved with SNP based phylogenies versus those constructed using MLST.

In this study, fifteen *L. monocytogenes* strains spanning two lineages were isolated from different products and associated environments in the fresh produce supply chain. According to the presence of SNPs, this study identified isolates that were defined as indistinguishable (<5 SNPs), which also fell into the same sequence type and identified isolates that fell into the same sequence type but differed by up to 59 SNPs. With regards to specific cases, indistinguishable strains NLmo2 & NLmo3 were isolated from raw product from the same location (single farm) a week apart. Likewise, isolates NLmo13 & NLmo16 were isolated from raw product in a different common location (holding/packing facility) around 3 weeks apart. These findings could suggest local cross contamination within a given space in the supply chain. In contrast, indistinguishable isolates NLmo7 & NLmo14 came from different locations in the supply chain where product was sampled months apart and isolates NLmo4 & NLmo5 were isolated within a week of each other but were produce was sampled at different points in the supply chain. The complexity of the fresh produce supply chain makes it difficult to draw conclusions about these indistinguishable isolates, for example, whether cross contamination has occurred (and in which direction) or whether strains were spread to these locations from a separate, but common source.

While it can be inferred that indistinguishable strains in the supply chain either came from a common source or were the result of cross contamination, it is impossible to confidently elucidate either scenario without the presence of a robust, targeted sampling plan which characterises *L. monocytogenes* using WGS. As well as a robust sampling plan that uses WGS as a subtyping method,

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investigations of this kind require strong context knowledge and epidemiological data to elucidate

contamination mechanisms (Stasiewicz et al., 2015). If comparisons of strains based on the core

genome do not provide sufficient resolution for discrimination of strains, the accessory genome of *L.

monocytogenes* has been shown to be highly variable between closely related isolates (Casey et al.,

2016). Inclusion of the accessory genome during analysis has been used previously to give sufficient

discriminatory resolution between isolates for determination of outbreak strains (Y. Chen et al.,

2016).

Routine commercial sampling of fresh produce and surrounding environments is often infrequent

and source tracking in a processing environment remains difficult due to the risk of recontamination,

that is, if an indistinguishable strain is found in a processing environment and on a raw material it

does not prove that the contamination came from the raw material or vice versa. The current study

demonstrates the power of WGS technology in terms of establishing the virulence potential of

isolates and discriminating between closely related strains of *L. monocytogenes* and should serve

towards designing and implementing a more robust sampling plan for detecting *L. monocytogenes* in

the UK fresh produce supply chain. To elucidate a specific source of *L. monocytogenes* in this

context, stakeholders would have to embark on a regular sampling regime of both the processing

environment and raw (incoming) and processed (outgoing) product combined with WGS and SNP-

based analysis. This approach may be able to differentiate sporadic vs. persistent strains and

highlight modes of *L. monocytogenes* transmission from the growth environment to inside the

processing environment. Within the processing environment, targeted sampling of product contact

sites as well as potential harbourage sites may reveal sources of the bacteria. Sampling of processing

environments is particularly important as these facilities are 'bottle neck' spaces in food supply

chains which encounter all processed produce and thus are potential sites of cross-contamination.

Sampling of processed (outgoing) produce is equally important as indistinguishable strains isolated

over time, from produce of different origins (growth environments), but passing through the same

processing environment would be indicative of cross-contamination and persistence in the

processing environment. Overall, more regular sampling and genome-wide strain characterisation is needed but may currently be beyond the scope of the fresh produce supply chain in terms of time and financial investment. For food production and processing companies, where the financial cost and negative reputational impact of a listeriosis outbreak is potentially large (McCollum et al., 2013), this approach should be more attractive because of the additional information it provides over current standard commercial characterisation techniques which only identify bacteria down to the species level.

Whole genome sequences of isolates revealed that all strains contained the *hly* (listeriolsyin O) gene and all strains had the internalin family of genes present (*inlA, inlB, inlC, inlF, inlJ, inlK*) except strain NLmo18, where *inlF* was missing. This gene codes for a protein that mediates invasion of the brain of the host by binding with vimentin (Ghosh et al., 2018) and suggest that NLmo18 has reduced virulence in the host based on the lack of *inlF*. A subset of isolates from lineage I (47% of total isolates) contained the *Listeria* pathogenicity island LIPI-3, a virulence factor which has been implicated in severe disease (Kim et al., 2018). LIPI-3 is confined to lineage I strains of *L. monocytogenes* and genes from this pathogenicity island encode Listeriolysin S (LLS), a protein which has been shown to display bactericidal activity and has the ability to modify host gut microbiota in mouse models (Quereda et al., 2017). This protein plays a crucial role in the infection cycle of *L. monocytogenes* and is present in epidemic strains. Importantly, whilst other authors have found that some strains isolated from food and environmental samples express a truncated Internalin-A due to PMSCs in *inlA* (Nightingale et al., 2005) all strains in this study, except NLmo20, contained a full and intact *inlA*. Since the short *inlA* variant that NLmo20 contains is predicted to be fully functional, potential virulence attenuation due to truncated Internalin A (Fravalo et al., 2017) can be ruled out for the strains featured in this study. Whilst all strains had two resistance genes present, NLmo4 and NLmo5 had two additional resistance genes, *bcrB & bcrC*, which encode a quaternary ammonium compound efflux SMR transporter. The presence of the virulence factors discussed above in strains isolated from the fresh produce

supply chain coupled with cross referencing of their subtype indicates that they have the necessary genomic prerequisites to cause disease and have many features in common with strains that have previously caused outbreaks of disease. This information is of clear interest to regulators and stakeholders in the UK fresh produce supply chain.

Listeria monocytogenes biofilms can be formed on many different surfaces in food processing operations and provide a protective environment for bacterial survival thereby increasing the risk of subsequent contamination (Colagiorgi et al. 2017). While all *L. monocytogenes* in this study formed biofilm, some formed significantly more biofilm than others on polystyrene 96-well plates when grown in MWB, a minimally defined media. This result suggests that some strains may have a competitive advantage over others in the fresh produce supply chain based on their ability to form biofilm, but previous research has generated mixed results when determining whether strong biofilm formation is an indicator of persistence in processing environments (Magalhães et al., 2017; Nowak et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is recognised that many environmental factors contribute to biofilm production in *L. monocytogenes* including substrate, surface material and temperature. In keeping with previous research, biofilm formation of *L. monocytogenes* showed strong strain to strain variation (Colagiorgi et al., 2017). In this study, isolates which were determined to be the same strain (by SNP analysis) did not necessarily produce equal amounts of biofilm, which could suggest that the method for quantifying biofilm in this study was not optimal. On the other hand, changes in biofilm production within *L. monocytogenes* strains may well be affected by phenotypic heterogeneity (Ackermann, 2015) as a strategy to cope with dynamic environments (such as those found in the fresh produce supply chain). Furthermore, the accessory genome (which was not investigated in this study) of all *L. monocytogenes* lineages is enriched for cell surface-related genes (den Bakker et al., 2013), the products of which are likely to be involved in the EPS matrix of biofilms (Colagiorgi et al., 2016). Whilst a correlation between lineage and biofilm production (lineage II isolates producing more biofilm has been reported (Borucki et al., 2003)) our results indicate that phylogenetic lineage does not affect biofilm

production (Di Bonaventura et al., 2008). More research is needed to highlight the intrinsic factors which determine whether strains are strong or weak biofilm formers in the presence of the environmental variables that are representative of environments found in the fresh produce supply chain.

Overall, the *L. monocytogenes* population in the UK fresh produce supply chain is diverse, in line with food isolates other countries such as Ireland (Hilliard et al., 2018), France (Moura et al., 2017), and Australia (Kwong et al., 2015). While some isolates have the necessary genomic components to cause disease and are closely related to outbreak strains, others are distantly related and are of less concern. All isolates formed biofilm but the intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting this characteristic requires further investigation. In terms of the fresh produce supply chain, a more targeted sampling plan is needed to determine whether potentially virulent strains are sporadic (i.e. infrequently isolated) or persistent in a given environment. This is particularly important in processing environments that have the potential to contaminate produce on a broad scale. Therefore, in terms of policy, fresh produce supply chains should begin to phase in sampling regimes which implement WGS as standard. Implementing this technology may give customers (retail) and consumers added confidence that growers and processors are informed of the *L. monocytogenes* risk in their supply chain and demonstrates a precautionary, rather than reactionary approach to consumer safety.

5. Conclusion

In the UK fresh produce supply chain, a variety *L. monocytogenes* isolates were found which are highly related to strains previously implicated in outbreaks of disease. These strains retain the necessary genomic components to cause disease. However, *L. monocytogenes* is isolated relatively infrequently during routine sampling in the fresh produce supply chain and the strains that are isolated come from a range of environments and stages in the supply chain. Overall, *L. monocytogenes* contamination in the fresh produce supply chain may be difficult to prevent because of the range of potential sources of the bacterium in the growing and processing

environments and this is reflected in the diversity of strains isolated. SNP analysis of isolates revealed a mixture of closely and distantly related individuals and suggests that contamination in the supply chain is a combination of sporadic contamination and contamination arising from common sources/cross contamination. This is the first study of its kind in the UK and demonstrates the power of WGS as a subtyping tool for *L. monocytogenes* isolates. More efforts are needed to implement this technology as routine surveillance in the UK.

6. Acknowledgments

7. References

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8. Appendices

Appendix A

Appendix Table A.1 **Assembly and annotation data associated with *L. monocytogenes* whole genomes from Illumina paired-end sequencing data**

Isolate	No. of reads	Depth of coverage	No. of contigs	Genome size (Mb)	GC content (%)	#1 Identified match (Kraken 8GB database)	% Similarity to #1 match	N50	rRNA copy number	tRNA
NLmo2	1871906	119	16	3022108	38.5	*Listeria monocytogenes*	89.62	537374	4	54
NLmo3	864832	59	19	3021207	38.4	*Listeria monocytogenes*	92.34	537190	4	63
NLmo4	909848	65	19	3065932	38.4	*Listeria monocytogenes*	91.76	432370	3	58
NLmo5	1508824	101	18	3065467	37.9	*Listeria monocytogenes*	89.49	432886	4	49
NLmo6	4673156	308	13	2878779	38.8	*Listeria monocytogenes*	92.08	477702	3	50

NLmo7	3859388	262	9	2919242	38.6	*Listeria monocytogenes*	91.87	596199	5	50
NLmo8	705258	48	16	2920871	38.4	*Listeria monocytogenes*	93.06	477606	6	49
NLmo9	612548	44	18	2920275	38.4	*Listeria monocytogenes*	94.64	302065	2	54
NLmo10	1941944	129	11	2917149	38.6	*Listeria monocytogenes*	91.47	476852	5	50
NLmo13	1000374	67	13	2929305	38.4	*Listeria monocytogenes*	92.86	1497074	3	63
NLmo14	1530718	103	9	2918988	38.3	*Listeria monocytogenes*	92.05	596189	5	50
NLmo15	2202970	158	16	2968413	37.9	*Listeria monocytogenes*	94.53	398348	2	61
NLmo16	850148	57	13	2927284	38.4	*Listeria monocytogenes*	93.48	1497064	3	54
NLmo18	488048	31	21	2968827	38.4	*Listeria monocytogenes*	88.87	455612	4	49

| NLmo20 | 2052146 | 138 | 10 | 2915683 | 38.9 | *Listeria monocytogenes* | 91.8 | 556332 | 3 | 48 |

Appendix Table A.2 **Pairwise differences in number of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) between *L. monocytogenes* isolates from the UK fresh produce supply chain**.

	NLmo10	NLmo13	NLmo14	NLmo15	NLmo16	NLmo18	NLmo2	NLmo20	NLmo3	NLmo4	NLmo5	NLmo6	NLmo7	NLmo8	NLmo9	Ref.
NLmo10	0	39261	56	39512	39262	39965	3301	2738	3300	40017	40017	2687	56	2425	2708	39752
NLmo13	39261	0	39260	8008	1	12519	39294	39353	39294	8999	8999	39280	39260	39334	39272	7744
NLmo14	56	39260	0	39513	39261	39965	3305	2742	3304	40018	40018	2677	0	2415	2698	39753
NLmo15	39512	8008	39513	0	8009	12344	39571	39630	39571	8513	8513	39508	39513	39598	39496	3541
NLmo16	39262	1	39261	8009	0	12520	39295	39354	39295	9000	9000	39281	39261	39335	39273	7745
NLmo18	39965	12519	39965	12344	12520	0	40016	40066	40017	12815	12815	39985	39965	40038	39973	12125
NLmo2	3301	39294	3305	39571	39295	40016	0	3405	1	40069	40069	3176	3305	3218	3191	39831
NLmo20	2738	39353	2742	39630	39354	40066	3405	0	3404	40133	40133	2927	2742	3032	2948	39872
NLmo3	3300	39294	3304	39571	39295	40017	1	3404	0	40070	40070	3176	3304	3218	3191	39832
NLmo4	40017	8999	40018	8513	9000	12815	40069	40133	40070	0	2	40042	40018	40078	40030	8323
NLmo5	40017	8999	40018	8513	9000	12815	40069	40133	40070	2	0	40042	40018	40078	40030	8323

NLmo6	2687	39280	2677	39508	39281	39985	3176	2927	3176	40042	40042	0	2677	1672	59	39781
NLmo7	56	39260	0	39513	39261	39965	3305	2742	3304	40018	40018	2677	0	2415	2698	39753
NLmo8	2425	39334	2415	39598	39335	40038	3218	3032	3218	40078	40078	1672	2415	0	1693	39825
NLmo9	2708	39272	2698	39496	39273	39973	3191	2948	3191	40030	40030	59	2698	1693	0	39769
Ref.	39752	7744	39753	3541	7745	12125	39831	39872	39832	8323	8323	39781	39753	39825	39769	0

Appendix Table A.3 **Presence/absence of key virulence factors in *L. monocytogenes* strains isolated from the fresh produce supply chain as determined**

by Abricate. The accession number for each gene is indicated below gene name. Legend Yes = ≥95% coverage & >75% identity, probable = ≥ 36.4% coverage

& >75% identity - = absent.

Isolate	NLmo2	NLmo3	NLmo4	NLmo5	NLmo6	NLmo7	NLmo8	NLmo9	NLmo10	NLmo13	NLmo14	NLmo15	NLmo16	NLmo18	NLmo20
no. of virulence factors	34	34	31	31	41	41	41	41	41	32	41	32	32	33	41
actA NP_463735	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ami NP_466081	Yes	Probable	Yes	Probable	-	-	-	-	-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	-
aut NP_466081	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-	-	-	-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	-

Gene															
bsh NP_465591	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
clpC NP_463763	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
clpE NP_464522	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
clpP NP_465991	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
cdsA NP_464841.1	Yes	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes
essC NP_645079	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
fbpA NP_465354	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
gtcA NP_466072	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
hly NP_463733	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
hpt NP_464364	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
iap/cwhA NP_464110	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Gene	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
inlA NP_463962	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
inlB NP_463963	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
inlC NP_465311	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
inlF NP_463939	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
inlJ NP_466343	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
inlK NP_464815	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
lap NP_465159	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
lapB NP_465191	Yes	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
llsA AHK25016	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes
llsB AHK25020	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes
llsD AHK25022	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes

Gene / ID															
llsG AHK25017	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes
llsH AHK25018	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes
llsP AHK25023	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Probable	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes
llsX AHK25019	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes
llsY AHK25021	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes
lntA NP_463967	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
lpeA NP_465372	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
lplA1 NP_464456	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
lspA NP_465369	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
mpl NP_463734	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
oatA NP_464816	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

pdgA NP_463944	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
plcA NP_463732	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
plcB NP_463736	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
prfA NP_463731	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
prsA2 NP_465743	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
vip NP_463850	Yes	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes

Appendix Table A.4 **Presence/absence of key resistance genes in *L. monocytogenes* strains isolated from the fresh produce supply chain.** The accession

number for each gene is indicated below gene name. Legend Yes = ≥95% coverage & >75% identity, - = absent.

Isolate	NLmo2	NLmo3	NLmo4	NLmo5	NLmo6	NLmo7	NLmo8	NLmo9	NLmo10	NLmo13	NLmo14	NLmo15	NLmo16	NLmo18	NLmo20
bcrB A7J11_05169	-	-	Yes	Yes	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
bcrC A7J11_05170	-	-	Yes	Yes	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

fosX A7J11_01023	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
lin A7J11_00340	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
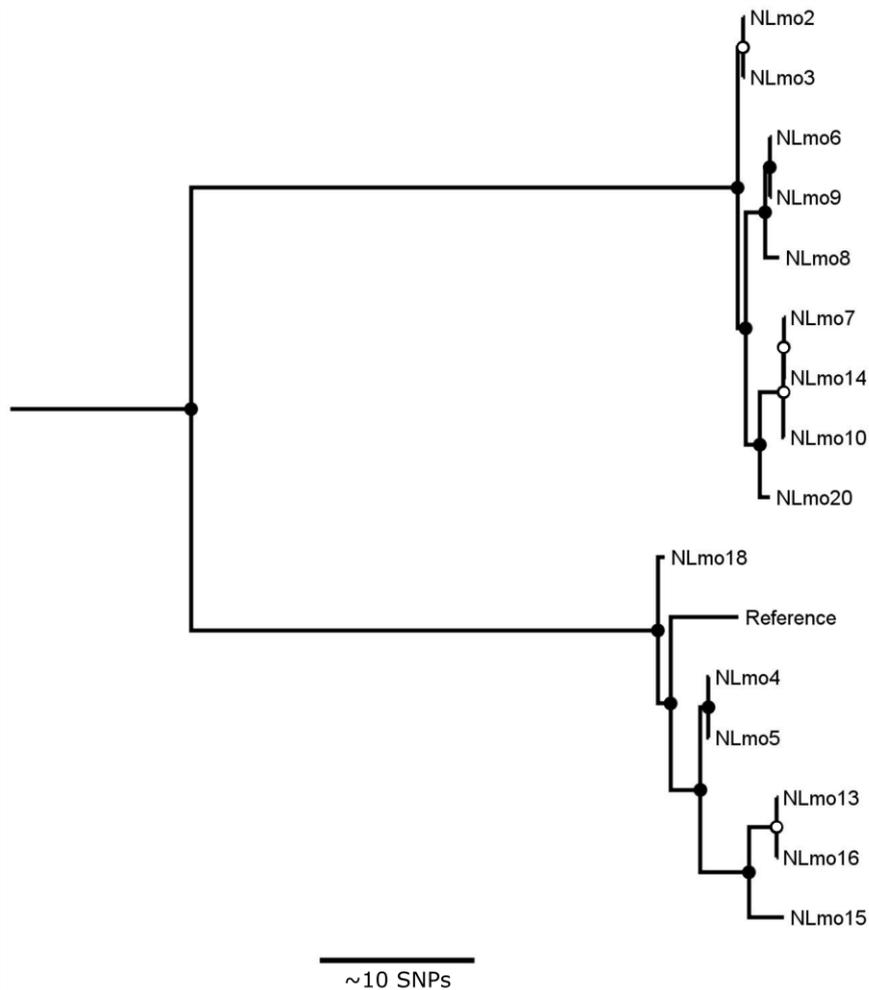
Appendix B

Appendix Figure B.1 **Maximum Likelihood phylogeny of 15 *L. monocytogenes* isolates isolate from the UK fresh produce supply chain. Tree was inferred inferred using a core-SNP based phylogeny from a 3288bp concatenated sequence of 7 housekeeping MLST genes in *L. monocytogenes* (IQtree version 1.6.7).** Tree is rooted through the midpoint. White circles indicate nodes with ≥ 95% ultrafast bootstrap support and ≥ 80% SH-like approximate likelihood ratio test support.

***Listeria monocytogenes* isolates from ready to eat plant produce are diverse and have virulence potential**

Alva Smith[1*], Jack Hearn[2], Clare Taylor[1], Nick Wheelhouse[1], Maciej Kaczmarek[1], Edwin Moorhouse[3], Ian Singleton[1]

1 School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University

2 Department of Vector Biology, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

3 Agri-Food Solutions, Cranbrook, UK

*Corresponding Author – E: alva.smith@napier.ac.uk   A: 6/1 Arneil Place, Edinburgh, EH5 2GP.

Highlights

- The *Lm* population in the UK leafy produce supply chain is genetically diverse
- Isolates are related to epidemic strains and possess the necessary genes for disease
- Biofilm production differs amongst closely related isolates
- WGS provides valuable information on isolates that is of interest to stakeholders