

Intellectual property Canada: Using yeast to make cannabinoids

April 26, 2022

Not many people say “yeast” is their most crucial teammate - but Alex Campbell and his fellow inventors do. Together with his colleagues from Concordia University, Campbell is part of a team that founded [Hyasynth Biologicals Inc.](#) The Hyasynth inventors rely heavily on their yeasty coworker to produce cannabinoids (yes, the stuff typically found in cannabis plants).

Campbell and the Hyasynth team developed a method of genetically engineering various yeasts so that they produce cannabinoids - the group of active chemicals in cannabis.

The difference between conventional cannabis production and Hyasynth’s model is that cannabis plants can only produce two cannabinoids - THC and CBD - in an active dose. In comparison, Hyasynth’s yeasts can produce more than 105 different cannabinoid molecules. These compounds have broad applications. For example, there is clinical evidence that the cannabinoid CBDV could be effective in managing behavioural issues associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The idea is that different yeasts can be engineered to produce specific target compounds, which can then be sold in therapeutic formulations.

Campbell realized his passion as an inventor while he was studying engineering. He knew he was passionate about science, and biology in particular, since his elementary school days. He never found an exact area of science that compelled him, and felt that much of his university experience consisted of learning other people’s theories. That is, until Campbell landed a position on the Queen’s Genetically Engineered Machine (QGEM) Team.

In 2011, Campbell and his teammates engineered the nematode, *C. elegans* to enhance its ability to chemotax (like a chemical compass) towards the pollutant Naphthalene. The goal was to use the pollutant-seeking worm to assist in environmental bioremediation projects.

About the QGEM project, Campbell remarks, “I loved the idea of modifying life to teach it to carry out applications that would help people. The term we use now for this is Synthetic Biology.”

Campbell followed this passion and enrolled in a Master's program at Concordia under Prof. Vince Martin, an expert on modifying yeasts to produce opioids. Campbell and his colleagues decided to see if they could replicate the cannabis pathway in yeasts. This was initially challenging as cannabis is a plant, while yeast is a fungus. They started by synthesizing various enzymes produced by amoebas and various fungi and then introducing them to yeasts. By doing this, they “taught” the yeasts to produce the enzymes themselves, creating the biochemical pathway that produces cannabinoids.

Early on, the Hyasynth team realized how important it would be for them to protect their intellectual property. Many of the cannabis enzymes were already patented, so there was a lot of pre-existing IP that Campbell and the team had to work around.

The Hyasynth team worked with BLG to file for patents protecting their core processes and technologies and the group has been able to leverage their IP as they grow the company.

“Engineering these organisms takes a long time. It’s been eight years that we’ve been doing this as a company, and we’ve been pre-revenue the whole time. So the greatest asset the company has right now is really our intellectual property,” says Campbell.

That will change later this year, as Hyasynth is starting production and sales of its yeast-created CBD, which they will sell for lower prices than CBD produced by cannabis plants.

When asked if Campbell had any advice for young inventors looking for inspiration, he said “put yourself in situations where you can apply the things you’re learning to real world problems. Join clubs, join competitions. Get out there, get your hands on stuff - that’s the best way to learn and create.”

BLG is proud to work with inventors large and small to protect their ideas and help grow their vision. Get in touch to learn how we can help you.

By

[David Laurie](#)

Expertise

[Intellectual Property](#), [Patents](#)

BLG | Canada's Law Firm

As the largest, truly full-service Canadian law firm, Borden Ladner Gervais LLP (BLG) delivers practical legal advice for domestic and international clients across more practices and industries than any Canadian firm. With over 725 lawyers, intellectual property agents and other professionals, BLG serves the legal needs of businesses and institutions across Canada and beyond – from M&A and capital markets, to disputes, financing, and trademark & patent registration.

blg.com

BLG Offices

Calgary

Centennial Place, East Tower
520 3rd Avenue S.W.
Calgary, AB, Canada
T2P 0R3

T 403.232.9500
F 403.266.1395

Ottawa

World Exchange Plaza
100 Queen Street
Ottawa, ON, Canada
K1P 1J9

T 613.237.5160
F 613.230.8842

Vancouver

1200 Waterfront Centre
200 Burrard Street
Vancouver, BC, Canada
V7X 1T2

T 604.687.5744
F 604.687.1415

Montréal

1000 De La Gauchetière Street West
Suite 900
Montréal, QC, Canada
H3B 5H4

T 514.954.2555
F 514.879.9015

Toronto

Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West
Toronto, ON, Canada
M5H 4E3

T 416.367.6000
F 416.367.6749

The information contained herein is of a general nature and is not intended to constitute legal advice, a complete statement of the law, or an opinion on any subject. No one should act upon it or refrain from acting without a thorough examination of the law after the facts of a specific situation are considered. You are urged to consult your legal adviser in cases of specific questions or concerns. BLG does not warrant or guarantee the accuracy, currency or completeness of this publication. No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior written permission of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. If this publication was sent to you by BLG and you do not wish to receive further publications from BLG, you may ask to remove your contact information from our mailing lists by emailing unsubscribe@blg.com or manage your subscription preferences at blg.com/MyPreferences. If you feel you have received this message in error please contact communications@blg.com. BLG's privacy policy for publications may be found at blg.com/en/privacy.

© 2026 Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. Borden Ladner Gervais LLP is an Ontario Limited Liability Partnership.