

Instrument: Pegasus[®] BTX and ChromaTOF[®] Sync

Enhanced Characterization and Comparison of Thyme Varieties from Different Geographical Origins

An Analytical Workflow Solution Combining GC-TOFMS and Automated Statistical Data Processing

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Introduction

Understanding the aroma profiles of herbs and spices, or other natural products, is important in the flavor, fragrance, and food industry to assure the quality of raw materials and therefore finished products. The ability to screen multiple materials in depth and efficiently is vital for producers to protect their supply chains and their brands. Comprehending and controlling material properties, quality, and authenticity enhances product development and production optimization, and enables businesses to solve problems faster and react to consumer and market demands.

The volatile and semi-volatile profiles of natural raw materials, such as herbs, can be determined with Gas Chromatography (GC) analysis. Time-of-Flight Mass Spectrometry (TOFMS) is ideal for this type of highly complex analysis due to its full mass range and fast data acquisition capabilities. The Pegasus BTX GC-TOFMS system allows such rich data sets to be collected, providing an enhanced ability to detect and identify scores of significant aroma species.

Comparing analytes and their trends across complex sample sets can be a tedious task. *ChromaTOF Sync* software facilitates this by automatically deconvoluting and statistically processing multiple data sets quickly and efficiently, providing an insightful output of differentiating sample features and characteristics.

In this work, we compared the aroma profiles of dried thyme from different geographical origins (France, Morocco, Poland, and Spain) to understand analyte similarities and differences in the chemical profiles that may impact their aroma.

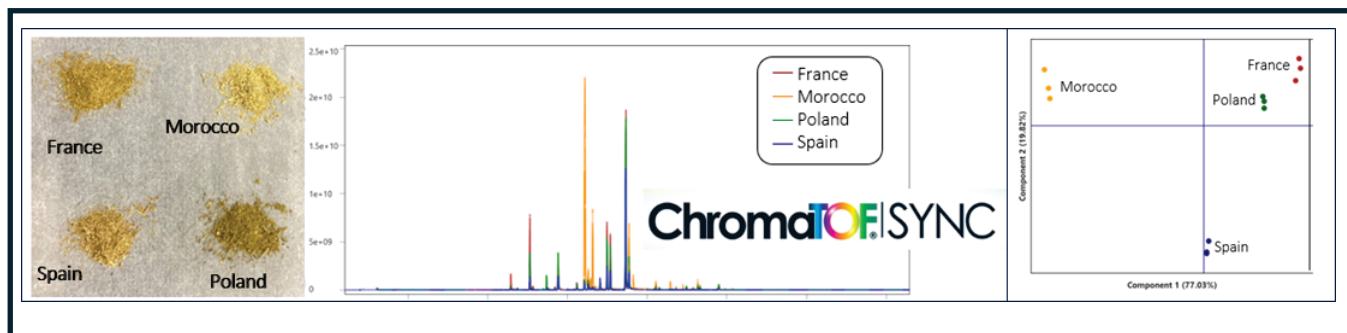


Figure 1. The Pegasus BTX and ChromaTOF Sync are combined to compare dried thyme from four different countries.

Experimental

Thyme samples from different countries (France, Morocco, Poland, and Spain), shown in Figure 1, were analyzed in triplicate with headspace solid phase microextraction (HS-SPME) and GC-TOFMS. For each replicate, 50 mg of dried thyme was measured into a 20 mL headspace vial. The samples were incubated for 2 min at 40 °C in the LPAL-3 agitator and then extracted for 5 min at the same temperature with a tri-phase SPME fiber (PDMS, DVB, CWR). Method details are shown in Table 1. An alkane standard was also analyzed with the same methods to calculate retention index (RI) values.

Table 1. Instrument (Pegasus BTX) Conditions

Auto Sampler	LECO L-PAL 3 Autosampler
Injection	Desorb for 2 min in GC inlet, split 20:1
Gas Chromatograph	LECO GC
Inlet	250 °C
Carrier Gas	He @ 1.4 mL/min
Column	Rxi-5ms, 30 m x 0.25 mm i.d. x 0.25 μm (Restek)
Temperature Program	40 °C (hold 2 min), ramp 10 °C/min to 250 °C (hold 2 min)
Transfer Line	250 °C
Mass Spectrometer	LECO Pegasus BTX
Ion Source Temperature	250 °C
Mass Range	35-500 m/z
Acquisition Rate	10 spectra/s

Results and Discussion

Comparison and characterization of thyme samples from different origins is significant work because the similarities and differences in their chemical compositions and associated aromas can impact the production and quality of the final product. This in turn affects supply chain costs, consumer perception, and meeting regulatory requirements.

Analysis of the four thyme samples using the Pegasus BTX GC-TOFMS system enabled full mass-range, non-target data to be collected at full system sensitivity, revealing highly complex aroma profiles (Figure 2). This rich quality of data allowed deconvolution to be performed successfully, clearly revealing a high number of mass spectrally distinct features, including co-eluting species, which could be identified with high confidence. Furthermore, automated statistical alignment of the data using ChromaTOF Sync for data processing facilitated quick and informative trends and patterns across the whole sample set to be easily visualized.

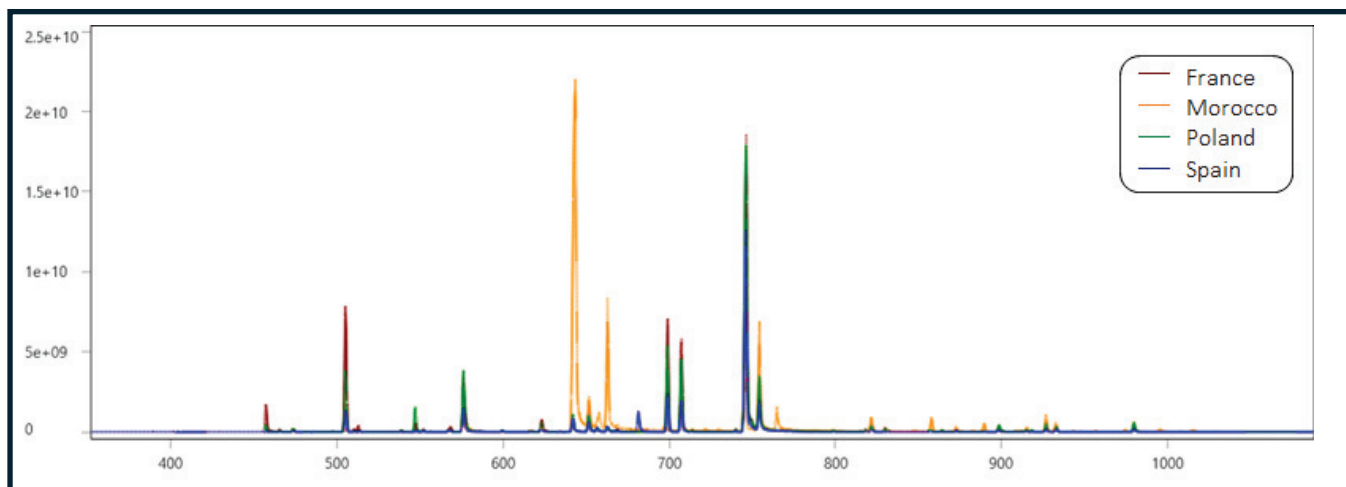


Figure 2. Overlaid full mass range chromatograms for the four thyme varieties.

Identification for these untargeted analytes can often be determined by matching the observed mass spectral (MS) and retention index (RI) data to library databases. For example, the identifications of thymol and carvacrol (Figure 3) were determined with spectral matching to the NIST library database (similarity scores of 851 and 931 for thymol and carvacrol, respectively) and supported by matched RI values (observed RI of 1294 and 1303 compared to library values of 1291 and 1299 for thymol and carvacrol, respectively). The spectral patterns are quite similar for these two analytes, so RI was particularly important in properly assigning the identifications. Confident identifications of these two analytes provided good insights into the samples and the variance in their aromas. Overall trends across the sample set are visually apparent from the overlaid chromatograms (Figure 3), indicating differences in the relative amounts of these analytes in the thyme from different geographical locations. For example, thymol was highest in the thyme from France (maroon) and

Poland (green), medium in the sample from Spain (blue), and lowest in the sample from Morocco (orange). The trends for carvacrol are different, as it was observed at highest levels in the thyme from Morocco relative to the other countries. These trends may be important because the analytes also have interesting aroma notes that likely contribute to the aroma profile of these samples. Thymol is described as herbal with herbal, thyme, phenolic, medicinal, and camphor notes, while carvacrol is described as spicy with spice, woody, camphor, and thymol notes.^[1]

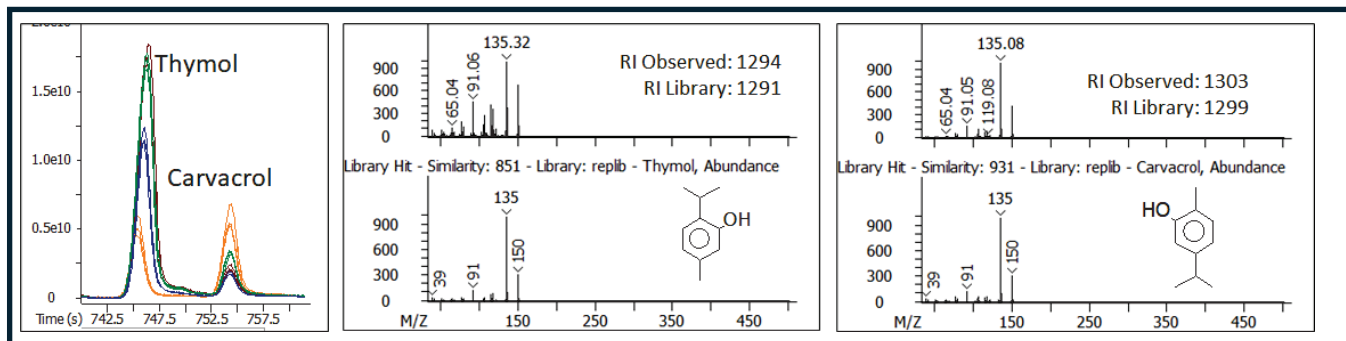


Figure 3. Thymol and carvacrol are identified with library searching of the full m/z data and supported with RI matching to library.

In addition to obtaining full mass range and full sensitivity data, the use of TOFMS also eliminates mass spectral skewing, which can be common and problematic when using scanning instruments. This full mass range non-skewed data further enables efficient use of deconvolution algorithms, which can often mathematically separate coeluting features. For example, 2-pentyl furan and β -myrcene, which chromatographically overlap, were deconvoluted and mathematically separated, extracting clear spectra for each analyte (Figure 4). This allowed confident identifications of both of these analytes, with spectral matching to library databases (similarity scores of 835 and 801 for β -myrcene and 2-pentyl furan, respectively) and RI support (observed RI of 992 and 993 compared to library values of 991 and 993 for β -myrcene and 2-pentyl furan, respectively).

The individual chromatographic profiles and trends across the sample set were easily observed by plotting XICs for each, m/z 93.07 for β -myrcene and m/z 138.11 for 2-pentyl furan. β -myrcene is observed at higher levels in the thyme from Poland and France compared with the samples from Spain and Morocco. 2-pentyl furan was observed at comparable levels in the thyme from Poland, France, and Spain, but at lower levels in the thyme from Morocco. These trends may be important as these analytes have contrasting aroma notes that likely contribute to the overall aroma profiles of the thyme samples. β -myrcene has spicy aroma notes with peppery, terpene, spicy, balsam, and plastic descriptors. 2-pentyl furan is fruity with fruity, green, earthy, beany, vegetable, and metallic notes.^[1]

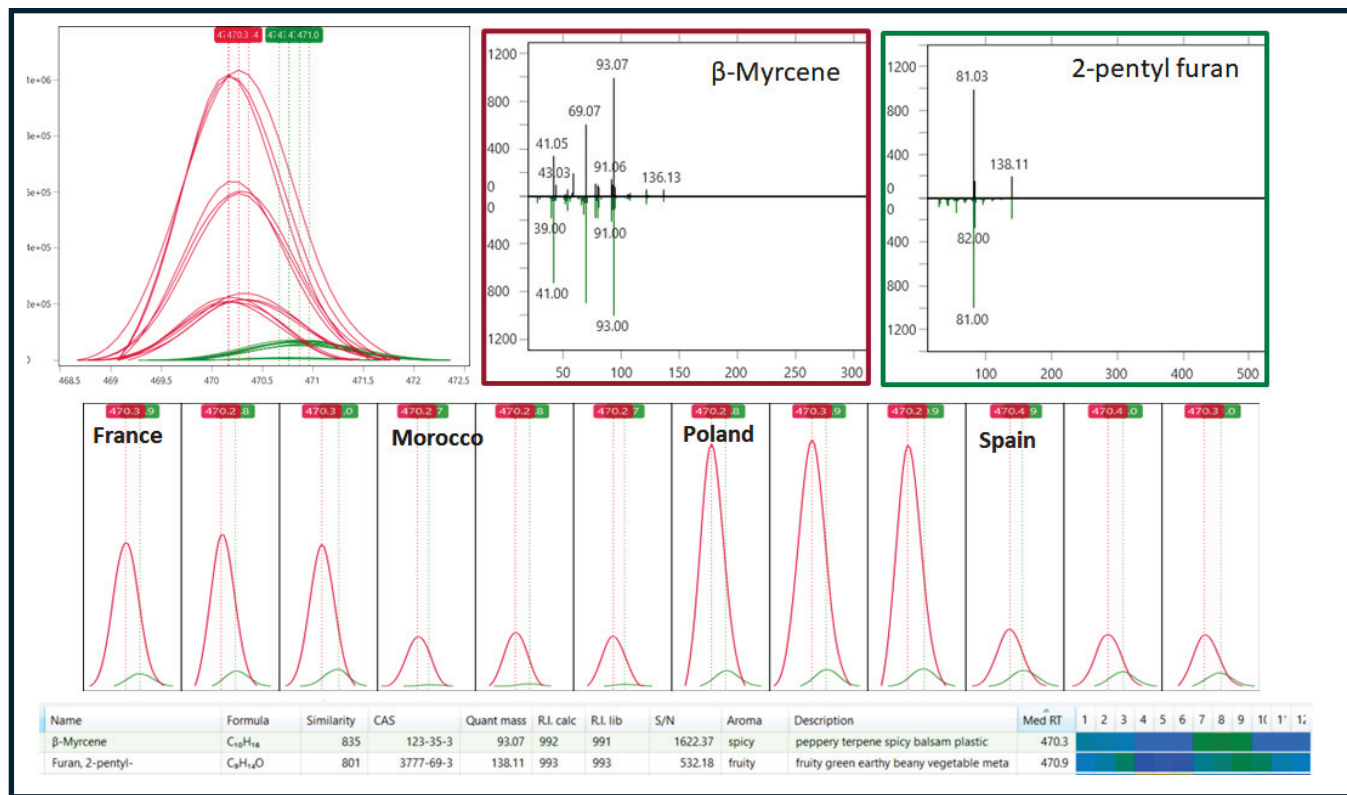


Figure 4. Beta-myrcene and 2-pentyl furan chromatographically overlap and are mathematically separated with deconvolution.

Non-target analyte detectability was excellent and a high number of trace level species were found due to the highly sensitive mass spectral detection of the BTX TOFMS system. Many low-level features are buried in the background and not easily visible in the TIC, so automated peak finding and deconvolution were valuable for isolating the spectral information in these instances. For example, an analyte identified as 2-hexanone (Figure 5), was not visible in the TIC, but deconvolution isolated spectral information that matched to library with a similarity score of 859. The 2-hexanone identification was further supported with an observed RI value of 795 compared to the library value of 790. Even though the feature was hidden in the TIC, the peak profile and quantitative trends were observed by automatic ion extraction of the unique XIC, m/z 100.09. This analyte was observed at higher levels in the thyme from France and Poland and at lower levels in the thyme from Morocco and Spain. These differences may be important as the analyte has fruity aroma characteristics.⁽¹⁾ Additionally, the odor strength is listed as high,⁽¹⁾ suggesting that even low levels of this compound may impact the overall aroma characteristics and contribute to the differences between the samples.

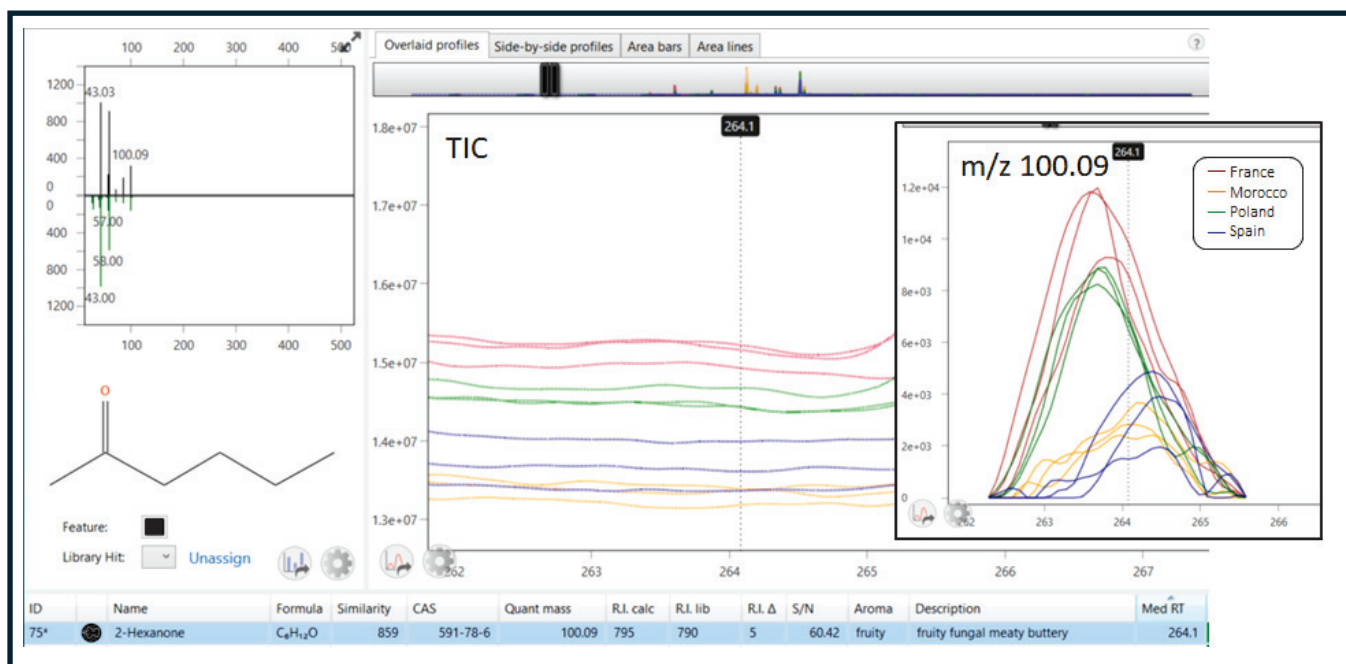


Figure 5. Sensitive detection and automated peak finding reveal low-level analytes that may not be visible in the TIC.

Aligning and statistically comparing the multitude of features within the rich, non-target data from the Pegasus BTX TOFMS system could be quite a tedious task in a multi-sample and replicate analysis. Here, the use of ChromaTOF Sync significantly increased the speed and output quality of this process.

For example, multi-replicate and sample results for thymol and carvacrol are informatively displayed together with ChromaTOF Sync (Figure 6). The peak table includes peak areas for all 12 samples making it easier to determine trends across the sample set. The peak area trends are visualized as overlaid chromatographic profiles, together with side-by-side chromatographic profiles, bar charts (line charts are also an option), and via color deviations in the heat map of the peak table.

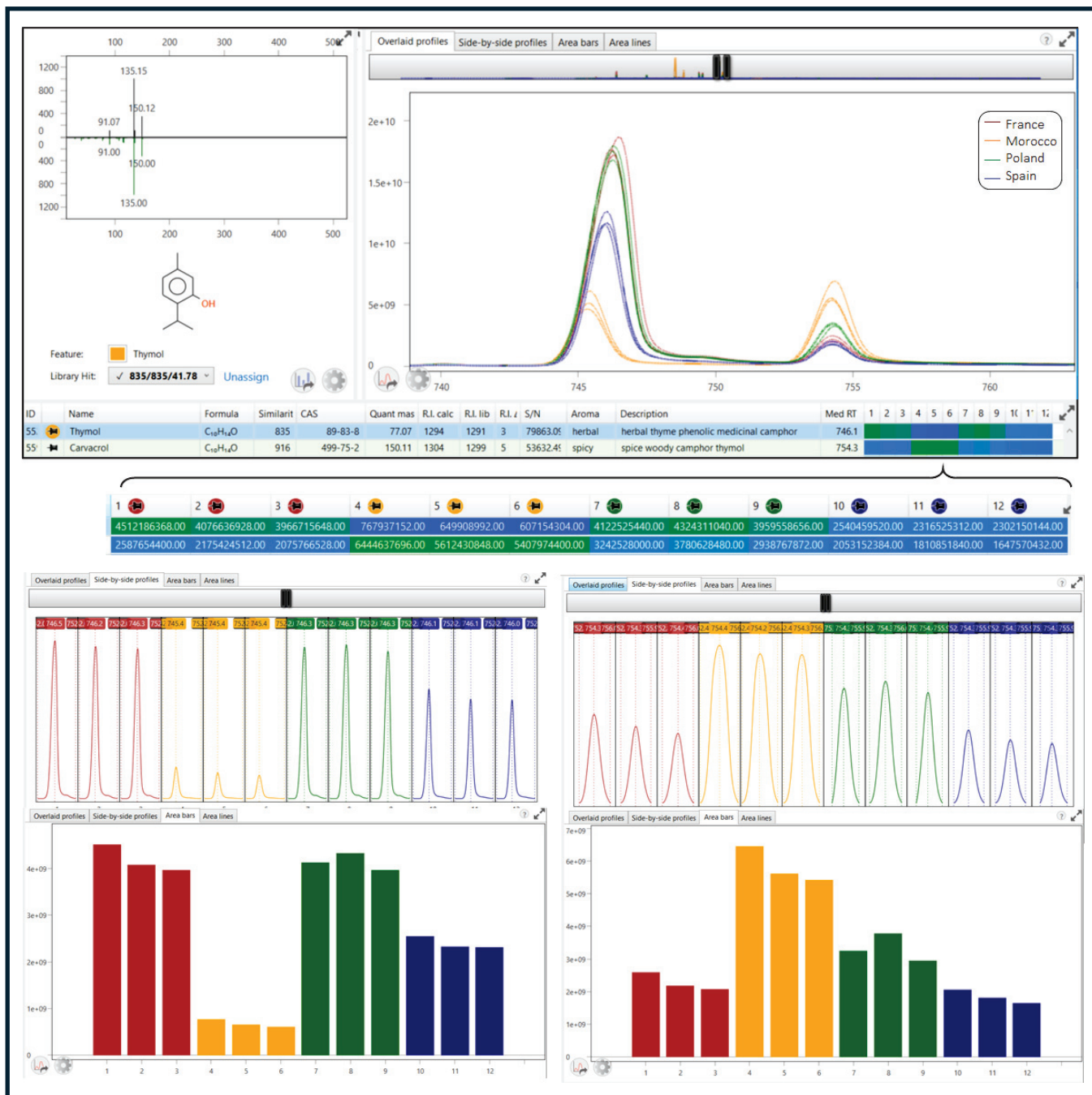


Figure 6. Peak information is compiled for the entire sample set with ChromaTOF Sync. Thymol (left) and carvacrol (right) are shown.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was also performed with the compiled peak information and overall trends between the samples were determined. The scores plot (Figure 7, left) represents each sample replicate as a data point. The samples that are closest to each other are more similar and those further from each other are more distinct. It enables an easy results overview to be visualized; thyme from Morocco and thyme from Spain are quite distinct, while thyme from Poland and France are more similar to each other. The associated loadings plot (Figure 7, right) reveals how the analytes (variables) contribute to these overall trends, which can then be investigated in more detail. For example, the levels of differentiation of four representative analytes (labeled A, B, C, D on the loadings plot) are displayed (Figure 8). This workflow enables analyte features contributing to significant sample deviations to be seen easily, and possible identifications using mass spectral and RI matching to libraries to be reviewed.

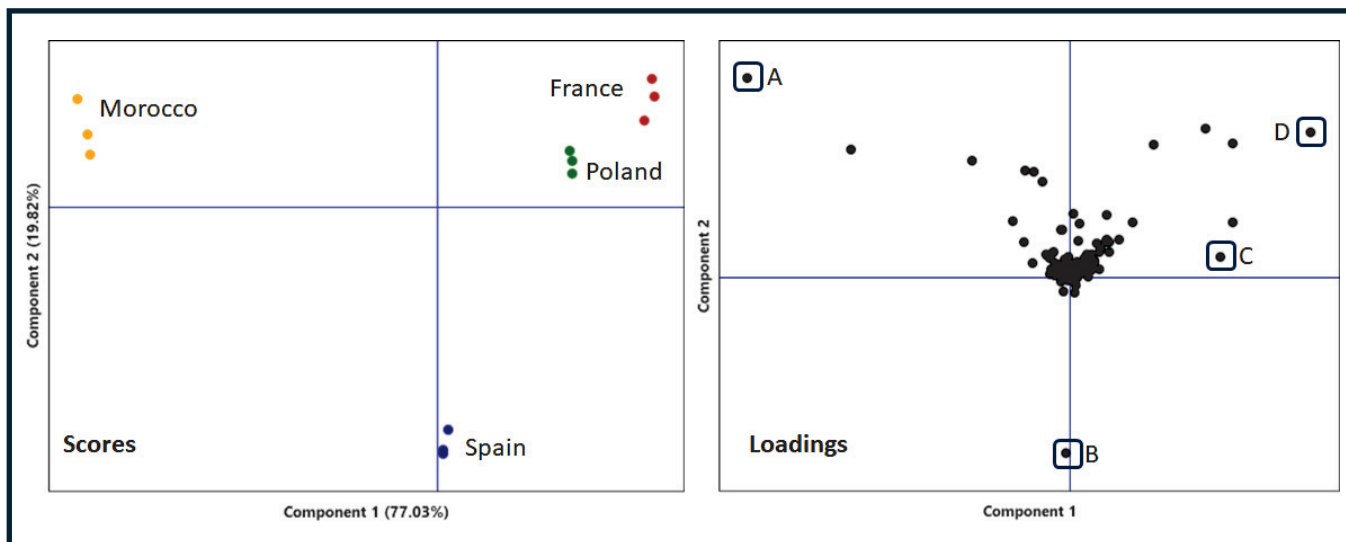


Figure 7. PCA scores and loadings.

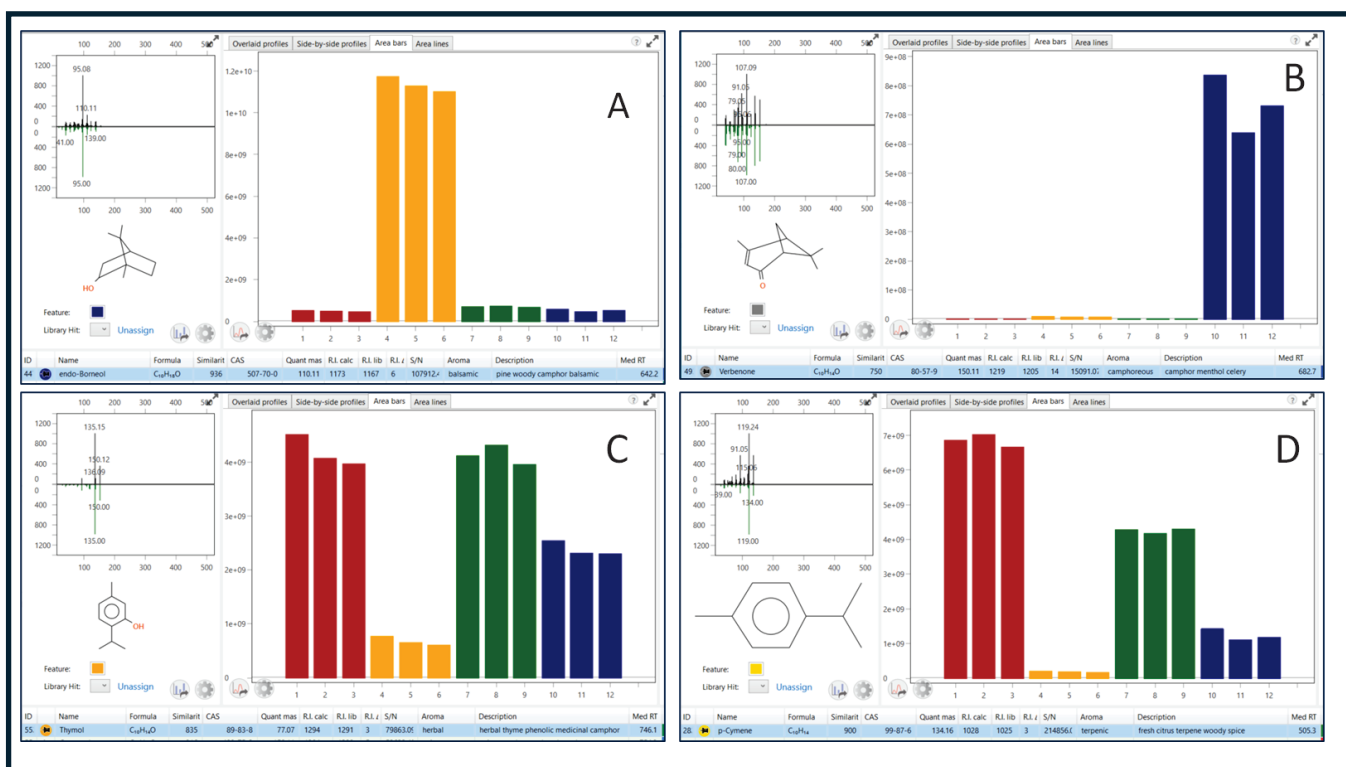


Figure 8. Representative analytes with distinct trends.

The heatmap feature in the peak table also allowed the large number of analytes found in the thyme samples to be viewed together, enabling highly efficient data interpretation and focus. The peak tables can be sorted by heatmap for each country, so analytes that were observed as elevated in the thyme from Morocco (Table 2), for example, are shown as “hotter” (red) in the top section of the table. Other representative analytes, sorted by heat map for France, Poland and Spain, are also provided (Appendix A).

Conclusion

In this work, the Pegasus BTX GC-TOFMS system and ChromaTOF Sync were used to evaluate and compare dried thyme samples from four different countries; France, Morocco, Poland, and Spain. Rich, non-target data with full mass range acquisition and enhanced sensitivity was collected, allowing efficient deconvolution and excellent analyte detection coverage across these complex samples. ChromaTOF Sync efficiently aligned and compiled analyte information across the sample set, facilitating the comparison and interpretation. Many distinct analytes with interesting aroma notes were observed in each of the thyme samples, and alignment allowed links between these differentiating chemicals to be made with the origins of the four thyme varieties.

Much of the sample preparation was automated with an LPAL-3 auto sampler and ChromaTOF Software, which also controls the GC and MS operation. Additionally, the Pegasus BTX has a StayClean™ Ion Source, which eliminates the downtime associated with source cleaning—a quality of high importance for the robust, routine analysis of multiple samples.

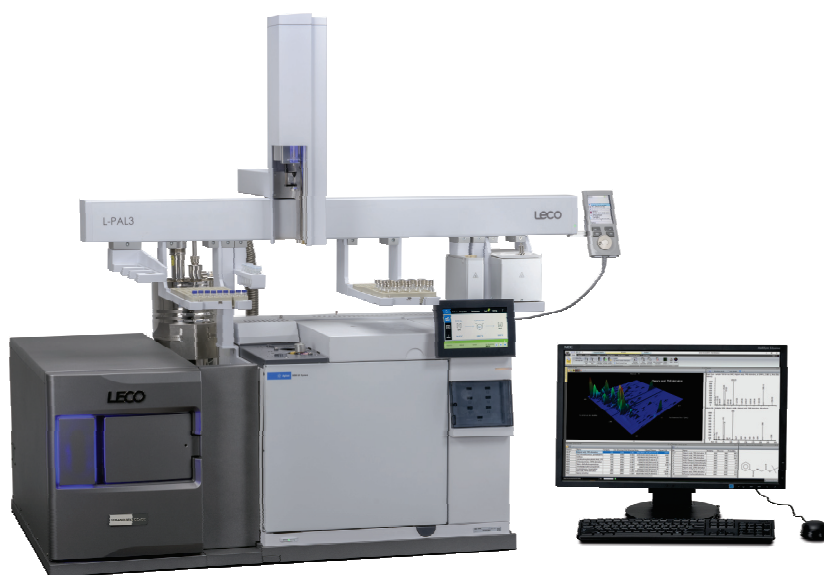
This efficient, full workflow solution demonstrates an ability to quickly gain important insights, which can help producers in the consumer goods sector to develop better products, understand the competition, and respond quickly to resolve quality, supply, or manufacturing issues.

Acknowledgement

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References

^[1] Good Scents database, <http://www.thegoodscentscompany.com>



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