

Riding the Coffee Route

An Athens artist and musician doubles as the bike-riding deliveryman for Jittery Joe's Coffee Roasting Company.



One more bag ought to do it. One more tightly packed brown paper sack, filled with coffee beans so freshly roasted that they're still warm, completes the load. Dozens of them, weighing 5 pounds apiece and piled like cordwood, overflow baskets mounted fore and aft on a sleek Italian-made bicycle.

Vernon Thornsberry—artist, musician, dishwasher, and bike-pedaling deliveryman for Jittery Joe's Coffee Roasting Company—straddles the seven-gear Bianchi Milano, ready to ride his weekly route through Athens. Off he goes, leaving an aromatic trail wafting in his wake.

Uphill Start

The first leg of the journey, a steep two blocks of Broad Street climbing to the relatively level plateau of downtown Athens, gets his heart pumping. "Sometimes I can ride that hill, no problem, and other times I have to push the bike up," Vernon says. "It depends on how I'm feeling, how late I played music the night before, and how much coffee I'm carrying."

Today he totes a typical load: about 80 pounds of beans bound for a who's who of Athens restaurants, bakeries, coffee shops, and bars. Many along the

ABOVE: Coffee beans emerge piping hot from a Jittery Joe's roaster. Even before they cool, the beans get packed for delivery to local restaurants, bakeries, coffee shops, and bars. RIGHT: Vernon Thornsberry totes a coffee order into The Grit, a restaurant where he moonlights as a dishwasher.



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“Delivering coffee...keeps me supplied with oils and brushes.”

Vernon Thornsberry

route know Vernon, at least by sight, and call out “hellos” to him or stop to chat.

Fringe Benefit

“The thing I like best about this job is getting to eat stuff along the way,” Vernon says with a smile. During stops at DePalma’s Italian Cafe, Five Star Day Cafe, the Last Resort, and other popular establishments, he doesn’t turn down offers to sample whatever’s cooking. “At Big City Bread they have really good pastries,” he says. “At The Grit, where I also work as a dishwasher, they make a great blueberry cake.”

Thus Vernon eats well on Friday, his once-a-week delivery day. That’s when customers stock up on coffee beans to last through their busiest time, the weekend.

Man of Many Talents

Besides appearing regularly on a weighed-down Jittery Joe’s bike, Vernon is known around Athens as a somewhat eccentric bluesman. He plays trumpet and drums—and sometimes other instruments as well. He also sings his own songs in a distinctly high, strident voice. “I call it ‘wild gumbo music,’ ” he says. “I either play alone or with a few friends under the



Vernon’s paintings fill a closet at Jittery Joe’s roasting facility, where Vernon drew a flaming-cup image on a loading dock door.



A self-portrait shows Vernon loading his delivery bike at Jittery Joe's. The artist says he often must dismount to push his load up hills.

Two Wheels and Caffeine

The owner of Jittery Joe's isn't named Joe, nor were the founders. "It's named after a place that appears for a few seconds in an episode of *The Simpsons* on TV," says Charlie Mustard, who as a college student ran the roasting machine part-time and later bought and expanded the operation.

Charlie, a fan of professional bicycle racing, sponsors a well-caffeinated outfit dubbed the Bean Team. "Having Vernon deliver beans on a bike helps publicize the Jittery Joe's cycle team," Charlie says, "but I sure don't expect him to set any speed records while hauling that kind of load."

name The Midnight Queens of Athens, GA. A few bars in town book me as a warm-up act."

Even with his long slate of part-time endeavors, Vernon claims he's first and foremost a painter. From a locked closet in a back room at Jittery Joe's, he pulls framed oil paintings depicting horses, beach scenes, instruments, and more—some on canvas, others on boards. One self-portrait shows him loading his delivery bike.

Charlie Mustard, owner of Jittery Joe's, refers to a stone slab bench in front of his roasting house as Vernon's office. "He'll sit there and work out arrangements with someone who's buying one of his pieces," Charlie says.

"I don't have any gallery connections," says Vernon. "I just sell a painting now and then on my own. It pays the rent. Music is a fun sideline, but other than a few tips in a jar, I'm not making a living at it. Delivering coffee is the closest thing I have to a steady paycheck. It keeps me supplied with oils and brushes."

What About Rainy Days?

Although the idea of delivering coffee by bike began as a practical solution to finding parking in a congested area, it's not always the best way to go. "When it rains, we switch over to Charlie's van," Vernon says. "He'll drive the route and either idle or go around the block while I drop off the beans."

Not a bad gig for a happy-go-lucky New Orleans native who says he's basically on an extended vacation. "I came to Athens on a vacation more than 20 years ago and just never left," Vernon says. "This town really appeals to me. I've met a lot of nice people. I can be creative and make a living, and that's good enough for me."

JOE RADA

Jittery Joe's Coffee Roasting Company: 780 East Broad Street, Athens, GA 30601; www.jitteryjoes.com or (706) 227-2161.



The sight of Vernon tooling through Athens with baskets full of coffee beans means it's Friday.