



Fourteen Pounds

Avid Audi customer, Julien Papon, makes some of the world's lightest and most sophisticated bicycles.

By Jordan Dykstra (copy) Paul Koziorowski (Photos)



Fourteen pounds. \$11,400. Eight hours of bespoke preparation. By any measure, these numbers are outstanding when speaking of a bicycle, but a Vitess is no mere bicycle, it is a carefully crafted performance machine, a work of art and a cherished belonging for any cycling enthusiast.

When I entered the Vitess Toronto showroom in Etobicoke, Ontario for the first time, it was immediately apparent that this shop was unique. There are no packed rows of bicycles on the floor or hanging from ceiling racks. The walls aren't filled with accessories and parts. The room is small, the bikes a select but enticing few and, aside from a few artistic photographs of bicycles, it is unadorned. The only other person in the showroom was Vitess founder, and Audi customer, Julien Papon, dressed unassumingly in jeans and a polo. Indeed, this was not a typical bicycle store.



Of course, there's nothing typical about a bicycle that weighs between 12 and 16 pounds, depending on component selection. A Vitess is all about carbon fibre. From handlebar to frame to seatpost, steel and aluminium are nowhere to be found. Most Vitess bikes are actually lighter than the minimal weight requirements for competitive events, but this has significant appeal for cyclists who prefer group rides to racing. And with Pro-Tour proven components like 3T handlebars, Campagnolo Super Record 11 controls or even electronic Shimano Di2 derailleurs, a Vitess bicycle is a machine built for a true cycling enthusiast. "We're really a 'wants' business and not a 'needs' type business," says Papon. "Nobody really needs this type of bike to go riding all day. With Vitess, you can spend \$4,000 or you can spend \$20,000. Will the latter make you five times faster? No it won't. But it's something different. And it's the same thing for watches or cars—it's the appreciation of superb quality and attention to detail. It's also a status symbol. It's what it says about who you are."

It's fitting then that the owner of an Audi Q7 should pioneer such an enterprise. Audi is well known for its efficiency, insightful engineering and sporty driving dynamics—characteristics that compare favourably with Vitess. Audi has also been a longtime trailblazer in the field of lightweight design, and the proprietary hand wrapped carbon fibre construction that makes up a Vitess frame-set is as lightweight as it comes. As Papon's business vehicle, the Q7's spacious interior is perfect for moving around cycles and parts. Even the Vitess emblem painted

on either side of the vehicle is refined and small, as befits the subtle, tasteful styling of both the brand he drives and the brand he rides. And while Audi doesn't have the resources to dedicate to such dealer-driver relationships, high standards of customer service remain one of the Four Rings' top priorities.

It's the hours of one-on-one time between a Vitess employee and a rider that set the brand apart from anything else in the cycling industry. In preparing for my own test drive, Papon first took me through an in-depth interview process to determine how the bicycle should match my body type, riding ability and personal goals. "Many of our riders are bankers, executives, accountants and lawyers who spend a lot of time at their desks. And, generally speaking, when there is a lot of desk time, there is a certain posture that comes with that. When you set this person on a bike, you need to understand those aspects of their life to get the right result." He also walked me through the extensive fitting process, pointing out that the linear body measurements of a rider are not so important as how he or she contacts the bike at the pedals, saddle and handlebar. These, when combined with comprehensive flexibility information, are the only measurements that truly matter.

Prior to taking his new Vitess home, each rider goes through a fully customized fitting session, where the saddle, stem and handlebar are adjusted down to

the millimetre and tenth of a degree for efficiency. Vitess recognizes that a rider's body will change in the coming months and years, and steps are taken to ensure the bike can be adjusted to match the rider through that time. When the components arrive from the manufacturers, Papon and his staff assemble the entire bike right in the showroom, simultaneously teaching the new owner the proper way to adjust the brakes and derailleurs, or pointing out how the teeth on the chainring are shaped differently so that the chain doesn't get caught when the gears are changed. He even provides his riders with a complete list of the specific amount of torque used to tighten each fastener. One of the disadvantages of carbon fibre is that if you over-tighten a screw it could crack the material, so Vitess always recommends using a torque wrench for accuracy.

As it says under the top tube of every bike, Vitess translates into speed. Speed, along with premium quality and customer experience, makes up the core of what Vitess

brings to the table. Of course, there is nothing hurried about the hours Papon and his employees spend custom-fitting and personally educating their customers – whom they refer to informally as Vitess Riders.

"We want to make sure that the purchasing and ownership experience of a Vitess bike is well beyond whatever else is available in the market," says Papon, who after two years of product development, engineering and establishing connections with partners, founded Vitess midway through 2009. Knowing full well how crowded the bicycle market is, he shied away from traditional methods, relying instead on a nimble, "just in time" strategy. Interestingly enough, Papon bases many of his techniques off of what he learned as an engineer in the automotive industry, sometimes while working on Audi projects.

The result of this is never having excess inventory to dump at a discount at the end of a season, and he knows each of his customers personally. "We're not in the business of selling bicycles, we're in the business of building a relationship with our riders." And there's no doubt it's working—Vitess is opening up a second showroom in London, Ontario, and there's talk of expansion into other cities across the country.

One of the most important aspects of the Vitess experience is the Test-Drive ride. Papon insists that riders should take a bicycle home to try out in a familiar setting so that they will focus on how the Vitess feels, instead of worrying about getting lost. My test bike was elegant in glossy white paint, with Vitess logos in red. It was equipped with Shimano Dura-Ace 7900 mechanical shifters and derailleurs, a Fi'zi:k Arione CX seat with carbon rails, a 3T set consisting of carbon handle bar, stem and seat-post and a pair of German handmade Light-



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Vitess founder Julien Papon measures each rider to determine what the proper size of the bicycle will be. By building a bicycle to the limits of a rider’s flexibility, one can prevent repetitive stress injuries and acquire the maximum amount of power from the minimal amount of energy.

weight Standard Clincher wheels, which are made completely of carbon fibre – including spokes, rims and hubs. All told, this Vitess checked out at \$11,400.

For my own journey, I rode through a rural region with enough small hills to get a feel for the cycle’s climbing prowess—I wasn’t disappointed. Despite a sudden downpour, the ride was fantastic. Before long, I felt comfortable with the precise steering, and I realized how my lengthy fitting session had helped to ensure that none of the power I generated was going to waste. The low weight made the bike incredibly easy to move, and the controls were smooth and intuitive, making switching between multiple gears at a time an easy task. The most amazing part of a Vitess is the recognition that if you push the pedals hard enough, you won’t stop accelerating. The experience was exhilarating.

Despite having nine different frame sizes available, Papon says that, unlikely as it may be, if they can’t make a perfect match, they won’t. So far he’s never failed to fit a bicycle to a person, but it’s not just the physical sizing that matters. A full work day’s worth of time may seem like a lot to ask of a potential customer—not to mention the price commitment—but he isn’t interested in putting

a Vitess into the hands of someone who isn’t passionate about cycling. Julien Papon may be the face of Vitess, but his riders are the voice. They become the unofficial brand ambassadors, spreading the word on Vitess among their fellow riders and enthusiasts.

And there is plenty to talk about. The care and attention to detail from Vitess staff throughout the fitting session is both professional and informal. And the community of Vitess riders is just as enthusiastic about the brand as Papon himself: there’s a certain amount of pride that comes with owning a Canadian product that literally weighs in amongst the best in the world.

Just as his brand’s name implies, Papon isn’t content to stand still. An automotive engineer by trade, he’s fascinated by the prospects of carbon fibre in the industry. Ultimately, he wants to push the development of the material to bring it to the next level. And if cycling organizations impose strict limitations on weight and design for events, he sees no reason why, given time, Vitess shouldn’t organize its own events and establish its own rules. While at the moment, Vitess focuses strictly on bicycles, who knows where the road of carbon fibre research could lead? //