The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about the tastes

**酸**

Putonghua pronunciation: suan 1
Meanings: acid, sour taste, sour or bitter feeling

酸 = acids: 無機酸 (wu ji suan 211 = none/in-organic-acid), 有機酸 (you ji suan 311 = has/is-organic-acid), 胃酸 (wei suan 41 = stomach/gastric-acid acid), 鍋水 (qiang shui 13 = strong-acid-water/liquid = strong/corrosive acids). Foods are 酸性 (suan xing 14 = of-acidic-nature) or 鹼性 (jian xing 34 = of-alkaline-nature).

酸 describes醋 (cu 4 = vinegar), 檸檬 (ning meng 22 = “lemon”-transliterated), 薑醋 (jiang cu 14 = ginger-vinegar = pig’s knuckles, eggs, ginger stewed in black vinegar). 酸奶 (suan nai 13 = sour-milk) = yogurt.


by Diana Yue