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 diet abstinence

菜 菜 means 青菜 (qing1 cai4 = green/leafy-vegetables), 餷菜 (song4 cai4 = accompany-rice-dish = cooked dishes), 地方菜 (di4 fang1 cai4 = land-direction/rice-dish = cooked dishes) = regional cuisine; 粵菜 (Yue4 cai4 = Guangdong/Cantonese-cuisine), 京菜 (jing1 cai4 = capital-cuisine = Beijing-style cuisine). 法國菜 (fa3 guo2 cai4 = “F”-rance-transliterated-country-cuisine) = French cuisine.

Customer 點菜 (dian3 cai4 = point-dish) = selects/orders dishes: 前菜 (qian2 cai4 = before-dish = appetizers), 小菜 (xiao3 cai4 = small/inexpensive-dishes), 主菜 (zhu3 cai4 = master-dish = main dish). Waiter 上菜 (shang4 cai4 = up/mount-dish = brings/erves dishes).

Balanced diet 有菜有肉 (you3 cai4 you3 rou4 = has-vegetable-has-meat = contains/features vegis and meat). Beggar 面有菜色 (mian4 you3 cai4 se1 = face-has-vegi/green-colour = has pale/bloodless complexion).

Putonghua pronunciation: cai4
Cantonese pronunciation: choi3
Meanings: leafy vegetables, dish of food, style of cooking

by Diana Yue