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 Chinese recipes

Putonghua pronunciation: ji1
Cantonese pronunciation: gai1
Meanings: Chicken

白切雞 (bai2 qie4 ji1 = white/plain-cut/sliced-chicken): Use 走地雞 (zou3 di4 ji1 = run~ground~chicken = free range chicken).

Plunge cleaned whole chicken, several 薑片 (jiang1 pian4 = ginger-slices) into pot of 滾水 (gun2 shui3 = boiling-water). On 高火 (gao1 huo3 = high~fire), return water to boil. Simmer 5 minutes on 中火 (zhong1 huo3 = medium~fire). 熄火 (xi1 huo3 = turn-off~fire, leave to 冷卻 (leng3 que4 = cold~become).

Take out chicken, 切 (qie4, cut/slice) into bite-size pieces. 熱吃 (ri4 chi4 = hot/warm~eat) or 冷吃 (leng3 chi4 = cold~eat = eat cold), dipping in chopped 薑蔥 (jiang1 cong1 = ginger~spring-onion) mixed with 油鹽 (you2 yan2 = oil~salt). Water in pot is 雞湯 (ji1 tang1 = chicken~broth).

by Diana Yue