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

菜 (cai4)
Putonghua pronunciation: cai4
Cantonese pronunciation: choi3
Meanings: vegetable, dish, cuisine

炒芽菜 (chao3 ya2 cai4 = stir-fry-young-shoots-vegetable = stir-fry bean-sprouts): Wash half kilo bean-sprouts. Wash bunch of葱 (cong1, spring-onions), 芫荽 (yuan2 sui1 = Chinese coriander), cut into 10-cm lengths.

Rinse handful of 蝦米 (xia1 mi3 = shrimp-rice = small sun-dried shrimps), fry in oiled wok until 金黃 (jin1 huang2 = golden-yellow). Add bean-sprouts, 炒 (chao3 = stir-fry) 2 minutes, 荈酒 (jian4 jiu3 = offer-wine = sprinkle with wine). Add spring-onions, Chinese coriander, 鹽 (yan, salt), 糖 (tang2, sugar), 麻油 (ma2 you2 = sesame-oil), stir-fry 1 minute. Serve immediately.

菜 means 青菜 (qing1 cai4 = green/leafy-vegetables), 類菜 (song4 cai4 = accompany-vegi = dishes accompanying rice), national/regional cooking e.g. 意大利菜 (yi4 da4 li4 cai4 = “Italy”-transliterated cuisine).

by Diana Yue