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 kitchens

厨 (radical 广 yan3, house/hall) = 廚房 (cook’s-room = kitchen):
厨子 (chu2 zì0 = cook-man = cook), 廚師 (chu2 shì1 = kitchen-master = chef), 廚具 (chu2 jù4 = kitchen/cooking-utensils).

Housewife 下厨 (xia4 chu2 = down-into-kitchen = cooks), re-heats 廚餘 (chu2 yú2 = kitchen-leftovers). Steakhouse hires 西厨 (xi1 chu2 = western-chef) as 主厨 (zhu3 chu2 = head-chef), 名厨 (ming2 chu2 = name-cook = famous chef) gets Michelin star.

Confucian motto 君子遠庖廚 (jūn1 zì3 yuān3 pào2 chu2 = gentleman-far-kitchen) means men with principles avoid the kitchen to avoid feeling sad about animals slaughtered for food. However, pragmatists believe 近廚得食 (jìn chu2 de2 shì2 = near-kitchen-get-eat = those near the kitchen get to eat the food).

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