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

香 (radical 禾 huo2, padi-crop) describes nice-smelling/tasting/associated things: 香蕉 (xiang1 jiao1 = fragrant-banana), 香槟 (xiang1 bin1 = “cham-pagne”-trans\u00f3lated). In her 香闺 (xiang1 gui1 = fragrant-room = boudoir), damsels 睡得香 (shui4 de2 xiang1 = sleeps-soundly).

香水 (xiang1 shui3 = fragrant-water = perfumes/colognes) fake 腹 香 (ti3 xiang1 = body-fragrance). Hong Kong’s Chinese name is 香港 (xiang1 gang3, Cantonese heung1 gong2 = fragrant/incense-harbour): we once produced/exported 香 (xiang1 = incense/joss-sticks).

Chef uses 香草 (xiang1 cao3 = aromatic-herbs), 香料 (xiang1 liao4 = aromatic-materials = spices), adding 香味 (xiang1 wei4 = fragrant/nice-taste) to dishes. Kitchen emits 香气 (xiang1 qi4 = nice-aromas). Don’t believe 隔篱飯香 (ge2 li2 fan4 xiang1 = across-fencing-rice-good-smelling = the grass is greener on your neighbour’s side).

by Diana Yue