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

味
Putonghua pronunciation: wei4
Cantonese pronunciation: mei6
Meanings: smell, taste

味覺 (wei4 jue2 = taste-feel) = sense of taste. Nose smells perfume's 香味 (xiang1 wei4 = aromatic-smell = fragrance), armpit's 臭味 (cou4 wei4 = bad-smell). Tongue's 味蕾 (wei4 lei2 = taste-buds) discern 味道 (wei4 dao4 = taste-path = tastes): 鹹 (xian2, salty), 甜 (tian2, sweet), 酸 (suan1, sour), 苦 (ku3, bitter), 辣 (la4, spicy-hot).

Chef adjusts 濃 (nong2, richness), 淡 (dan4, blandness) to make dishes 美味 (mei3 wei4 = beautiful-taste = delicious). Kitchen's 五味架 (wu5 wei4 jia4 = five-tastes-rack = condiments rack) has 味精 (wei4 jing1 = taste-essence = monosodium glutamate = MSG).

Bores 言語無味 (yan2 yu3 wu2 wei4 = words-speech-no-taste = talk tastelessly/dryly). Fashion designers have 品味 (pin3 wei4 = appreciate-taste = aesthetic taste).

by Diana Yue