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

艺 (yi4)
Cantonese pronunciation: ngai6
Meanings: art, skill

艺 = 工艺 (gong1 yi4 = work/craft-skill = crafts), 艺术 (yi4 shu4 = art-method = fine arts).

Cooking is 手艺 (shou3 yi4 = hand-skill = clever manual skill).
Apprentices follow 名厨 (ming2 chu2 = name-kitchen = famous/master chefs) to 学艺 (xue2 yi4 = learn-skill = acquire training):
选料 (xuan3 liao4 = choose-materials = materials), 刀工 (dao1 gong1 = knife-work = cutting), 调味 (tiao2 wei4 = adjust-flavor = flavoring), 烹煮 (peng1 zhu3 = cook-boil = cooking).

Dishes' 色 (se1, color = attractive presentation), 香 (xiang1, good smell), 味 (wei4, good taste) prove cook’s 厨艺 (chu2 yi4 = kitchen-art = skill/art of cooking). Gourmets specialize in 吃的艺术 (chi1 de0 yi4 shu4 = eat-’s-art-method = the art of eating).

by Diana Yue