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 barbecues

烤 (kao3, test/torture) means heat/warm/cook in hot air. Drenched clothes are put near fire to 烤火 (kao3 huo3 = warm-with-fire), 烤乾 (kao3 gan1 = warm-till-dry). Desert sun 烤炙 (kao3 zhi4 = heats-scorches) earth.

烤箱 (kao3 xiang1 = baking-box = 烤爐 kao3 lu2 = baking/grilling-oven) can 烤烤 (hong2 kao3 = bake-roast/grill) bread/potatoes. 蒙古烤肉 (Meng2 Gu3 kao3 rou4 = “Mongol”-transliterated-grill-meat) = Mongolian barbecue. Gourmets love 北京烤鴨 (Bei3 Jing1 kao3 ya1 = north-capital-roast-duck = Beijing duck, aka Peking duck), 烤全羊 (kao3 quan2 yang2 = roast-whole-lamb).

Picnickers prepare 烧烤 (shao1 kao3 = burn-roast/grill = barbecue). Food placed over 烤架 (kao3 jia4 = grilling-rack) is easily 烤熟 (kao3 shou2 = grilled-cooked/done).

by Diana Yue