

"Roast beef, potato and blue cheese soup, roasted vegetables and hot fresh rolls. The only thing better than the smells produced by making Christmas dinner is our pleasure at sitting around the table together to eat it.

After church, after a few presents, after reading through the Christmas cards sent by family and friends, there is a meal to wrap up the day. Children and grandchildren, of course, look forward most to the beginning of Christmas Day - the presents. But I spend all of Christmas Day in anticipation of my favorite part at the end - the dinner.

I'd give all the presents I've ever gotten in exchange for all the Christmas dinners I've been fortunate to share with my loved ones through the years. And my appreciation for the meal has grown, as has my appreciation of the true meaning of the day.

Undertaking a meal of this importance should be stressful, but it isn't. The grocery shopping isn't as bad as it is at the shopping mall. Thanks to our affordable, abundant supply of American food, the bills aren't so steep for one of the best meals of the year. And, when our family prepares Christmas dinner, unlike for other meals of the year, the kitchen is far from empty, full of family, affectionate chatter, laughter and good cheer.

And Christmas dinner has so many components that reflect the best parts of American life. We pray at the table, reflecting our faith and our hopefulness that our country will continue to enjoy God's blessing. We invite our closest relations, instilling the importance of family in younger generations by honoring the senior members of our family who made possible these continuing holiday traditions. We share the bounty of our American agriculture, and we undertake charitable efforts to share that bounty with the less fortunate in our communities. And we call to mind our countrymen and countrywomen serving in uniform far from their homes and families at this special time of year - praying for their safety and recognizing their service.

With all that to remember, you might forget the food. But that food is important, too. The Christmas dinner is the capstone to the day - the means by which we gather together in the warmth of our homes, to share the warmth in our hearts.

To me, it's the very essence of Christmas in America - the meaningful time we have to spend with family and friends, grateful for the blessings in our lives and in our nation.

After dinner, there is dessert; and after the restless sleep in anticipation of Christmas, everyone sleeps well on Christmas night. I always sleep soundly after a day spent with family, spent on spiritual reflection, and spent making the most important meal of the year for my family.

Merry Christmas to all of us in Southern Missouri. As you gather around the table this holiday, my prayers and wishes are for a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year."